OTORIMONOGATARI

DECOY TALE

NISIOISIN

TRANSLATED BY
KO RANSOM

Table of Contents

001

002

003

004

005

006

007

008

009

010

011

012

013

014

015

016

017

018

019

020

021

022

023

024

Afterword

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NISIOISIN

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Decoy Tale

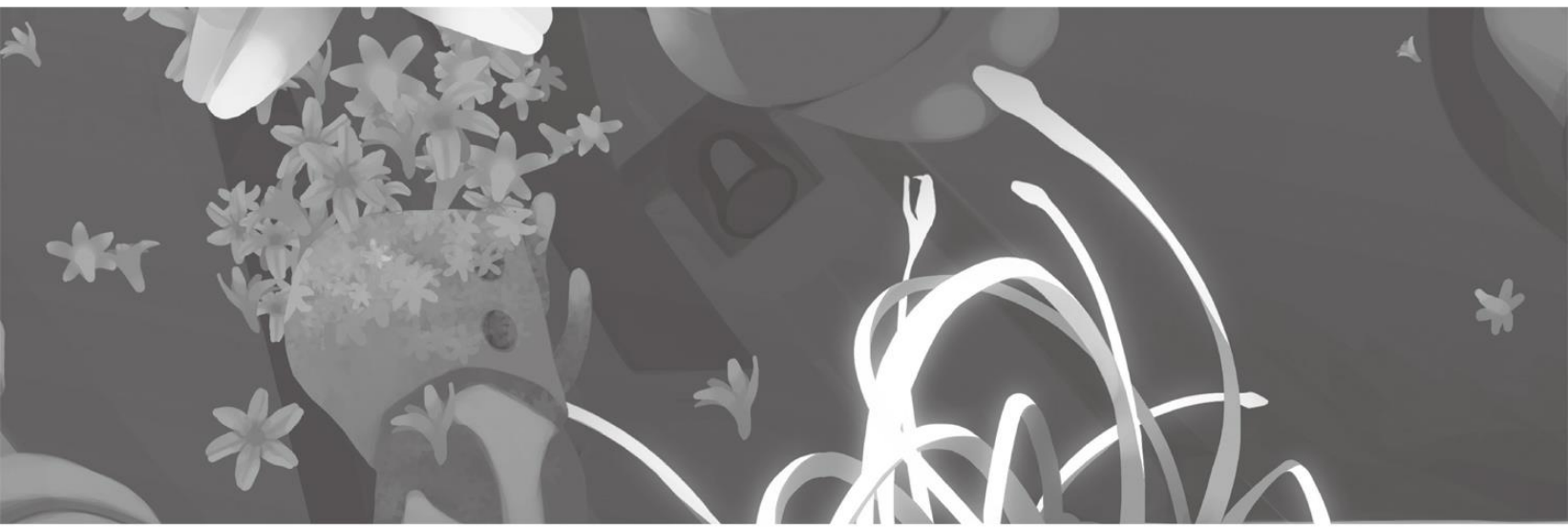
NISIOISIN

Art by VOFAN

Translated by Ko Ransom

VERTICAL.

CHAPTER CHAOS NADEKO MEDUSA



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CHAPTER CHAOS

NADEKO MEDUSA

NADEK O
SE NGO KU

001

Nadeko Sengoku, fourteen years old.

Born June 3, Gemini, blood type B.

Five feet tall (and growing), body weight 84 pounds or so.

Right-handed.

20/20 sight in both eyes.

Both parents alive and well.

Monthly allowance: 1,200 yen.

Member of Year 2, Class 2 at Public Middle School #701. Seat number 28.

First-term report card. Japanese: C. Math: D. Social studies: B. Science: D. English: C. P.E.: D. Music: D. Art: B. Technology and Home Economics: A.

Best subject: None in particular. Worst subject: Math.

No Extracurriculars Club.

On softball team during part of first year, but voluntarily withdrew after less than a month. Reason given: “Tired.”

Doesn’t own a bicycle.

Doesn’t own a cell phone. Doesn’t own a computer.

Reads about two books a month.

Reads two magazines a month, too.

Few friends.

No best friend. No boyfriend.

Prefers pants over skirts.

Rarely wears them voluntarily.

Given up as far as school uniforms go.

Prefers going barefoot, sandals and bare feet.

Always barefoot at home, even in the winter.

Hates socks, in other words.

They feel gross.

Not particularly attached to any hairstyle, but has long bangs in the front.

They've been long ever since elementary school.

Parents used to cut her hair, but now cuts her own.

Hobby: Collecting hats.

Now owns a total of twelve hats. Has many types of hats (from safari hats to swim caps), but prefers ones with brims.

Wears these hats low over the eyes.

So that people can't see her eyes.

So that she doesn't have to see eyes.

Doesn't like meeting eyes with others.

Doesn't like crowded places.

Reserved, gloomy, and shy personality.

Questionable vocabulary and doesn't like talking.

Can't talk while looking at someone's face.

Doesn't like being looked at, doesn't want to be looked at.

Can't stand seeing or being seen.

Always looks down, facing the ground, stammering and mumbling when she does talk.

Usually stays quiet.

Keeps her mouth shut.

Silent, mute.

Favorite foods: Salisbury steak, stir-fried noodles.

Favorite manga: ’80s.

Favorite novels: Young adult.

Favorite movies: Fantasy.

Favorite sport: Figure skating (favorite to watch).

Favorite games: Retro.

Favorite music: Folk songs.

Favorite color: Purple.

Favorite Big Brother: Big Brother Koyomi.

Favorite person.

Koyomi Araragi.

002

i think it’s a very wonderful thing to fall in love with someone.

It’s a feeling like that’s all you need in your life, all you need to be cheerful, to make everything soft and fluffy.

The world is such a tough place, with so many things that are annoying or that don’t go your way, so there’s no end to things to be worried about, and the things you think will always be there for you might crumble at a moment’s notice, and the rules you think you could rely on turn out to be less reliable than you thought, and your body and your heart get so easily tired, so exhausted that you might just find yourself wanting to slump over on the ground, but even so, it’s like you can keep pushing yourself if you love someone, like you can always stay standing and keep walking if that someone is kind enough to stay by your side.

It’s like you can smile.

Even if you want to cry.

…

……

……..

…So then.

So then, why?

So then why–am i.

Why is Nadeko curled up in a ball right now?

Why am i crouched down like this?

Arms around Nadeko’s knees, looking at the ground.

Why am i crying?

i don’t know.

i don’t know, i don’t know, i don’t know.

Really, why?

Why did it turn out like this?

i don’t know–

and i don’t want to know, either.

“What the hell are you doing, thinking about how it could’ve gone this way, or that way, or the other way–hmmmm?” the white scrunchy around Nadeko’s right wrist says–no, it isn’t technically a scrunchy.

This thing that looks like an armband is a white snake.

A white snake with bristling scales.

According to the horse’s mouth (the snake’s mouth?), he said to call him a serpent, not a snake–he seems to like the sound of it better.

It fits me well, he says.

Of course, “snake” and “serpent” should mean the same thing, so it shouldn’t be a problem if i describe this white scrunchy as a snake.

That isn’t the problem.

The problem is anywhere but there.

The scrunchy–the Serpent speaks.

His tone drips with malice.

It’s not about this or that–there’s no other way it could have gone, he says.

“Listen here. You know it’s aaaall your fault–my dear little Nadeko.”

“No,” i retort.

But Nadeko knows better than anyone that the retort is nothing more than a reaction, that there isn’t an ounce of strength in the word–Nadeko just reflexively denied what Mister Serpent said, nothing more.

A reaction, a reflex.

Nothing close to a retort.

“It’s not Nadeko’s fault.”

i try repeating the words, but they’re all but empty.

Empty and pointless.

No different from saying, it’s Nadeko’s fault.

Even so, Mister Serpent is only saying that to be mean. He must not actually think that it’s Nadeko’s fault–because the Serpent is something far removed from any moral concepts like good and evil.

For this snake, it’s only black or white, not good or evil.

White or black. Black or white.

That’s all.

No gray.

No judgment.

Because his opinion is–

“*Hsshh hsshh hsshh*–that’s exactly right, my dear. You know, I’d always thought of you as some unreliable brat whose thoughts I could never quite wrap my head around, but it actually seems like you see me for who I really am. Or did you just now figure it out? Because if you think about it, it’s already too late–hmmmm?” says the Serpent.

It feels like his wide-open mouth is about to swallow Nadeko up–and even if it doesn't, his bared, glinting fangs make her shrink.

i cower.

…No, that's a lie.

Fangs don't scare Nadeko anymore.

They're nothing to Nadeko.

i was surprised the first time i "saw" Mister Serpent, and i was scared too, but now i can look back fondly on a Nadeko who let this level of sharpness scare her, a Nadeko who could be afraid of it.

Nadeko is no longer afraid of anything.

There's nothing Nadeko can be afraid of anymore.

Nothing anymore.

Those days when the fangs seemed scary.

Those days when Nadeko was a regular middle school student.

…Those days when Nadeko was a victim.

How long has it been since then? Well, i say so nostalgically, but not enough time has really gone by for Nadeko to say she's looking back on all of this.

That was just the other day.

i remember every detail.

At the same time, though, that other day is so far gone i can never return to it–you can say it's also the distant past.

While i wish from Nadeko's heart that i could go back to being the person i was then, i know that's impossible.

"Well, I wouldn't say impossible. Listen here, Nadeko–returning to the past isn't as difficult as you mammals think," the Serpent says.

No, i guess Mister Serpent isn't technically saying anything–he's speaking directly to Nadeko's heart.

That's what he said.

You're simply imagining my voice, he said.

Well, no, he never actually said anything.

He never actually tells Nadeko anything.

i'm hearing things.

i'm seeing things.

That's what it is.

That's what an aberration is.

Something aberrant, some kind of alteration.

If only i'd understood that better–then things probably wouldn't have turned out this way.

This way. Any way.

"And so, my dear. If it's your wish to return to the past, I wouldn't mind granting it–after all, this great serpent before you is what your kind calls a god."

"A god…"

Why?

The words seem empty.

They sound so "vackuous."

The title, which should feel trustworthy, sounds like a flimsy front to Nadeko now. They don't make it into Nadeko's head, as if i was reading a math textbook.

A god.

A god…

God resides in all of our hearts, apart from which there is no faith–who did i hear that from?

“Will something change if we go back to the past?” i ask.

“Oh, no. Not a thing. Everything is just going to happen all over again. Like a refrain, or maybe a repeat, or no, I guess I should take this opportunity to say it’s like an Ouroboros. Going around and around forever, for eternity, just repeating itself–and yet, Nadeko, it’s at this point, when you have your arms around your knees, when you’re crying and cowering, that you always say that you want to go back to being the person you were. And then I grant your wish, each and every time. Like a god, you know?”

“…What a ‘tragidy.’”

It is a “tragidy.”

Even dying would be a better option–it’s not an exaggeration in this case.

Even living.

You could go so far as to say that having to rehash these same emotions forever is no different from hell–but at the same time, Nadeko can’t help but think.

This white snake wrapped around her right wrist that won’t let go, Mister Serpent–isn’t he the one who has had to repeat such a hell for eternity?

This snake that’s lived for over a thousand years.

This snake that’s died for over a thousand years.

Living and dying and living, again and again.

This snake that’s become a god.

That’s right. Mister Serpent is, after all, a god–something Nadeko doesn’t believe in.

A god that Nadeko–“ressurrected.”

“In that case, i don’t want to go to the past… Nadeko just wants to stay here like this forever.”

“Ah, is that so. Well, listen, my dear, you say that, but you don’t even know where you are and what you’re doing right now, do you, Nadeko?”

“i understand that much.”

That much, at least.

There are a lot of things that Nadeko doesn’t understand now, but she hasn’t lost sight of herself to the point that she doesn’t even know where she is.

i’m in a good place. No, that’s a lie.

Nadeko has lost sight of herself. She has lost herself.

But i still know.

Nadeko at least knows–where she is now.

She at least knows that she’s under the floor of a shrine.

That she has her arms around her knees under the floor of a shrine that once went to ruin–Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

“i wonder what a stranger would think if they saw Nadeko now. Whispering here under the floor of a shrine. Would they think i’m a thief?”

“Beats me–but every human is like a thief to one extent or another. All they ever think about is how to snatch away someone’s vested interests.”

“i don’t know…”

“I think you do. Isn’t that something you’ve come to know better than anyone else in the world over the past few days? Hmmmm?”

“But i think there are a lot of people who aren’t like that, too.”

“If you’re going to say that, you ought to say there are a lot of *times* when *things* aren’t like that–because it’s up to the way a person decides to be in the moment, right? It’s easy for a good person to become a bad one, and it’s easy for a bad person to become a good one. Isn’t that the case for all the people you’ve dealt with until now? Have you forgotten? Hmmmm?”

“…”

i have the feeling that he’s trying to talk Nadeko into a corner, but that’s not why she’s quiet.

Nadeko often goes quiet when she doesn’t know what to do, but this time it’s different.

i’m quiet for a different reason.

Rustle.

i went quiet because of that sound.

It seemed to reset the Serpent’s hallucinatory voice along with Nadeko’s own, which just barely spoke to herself–seemed to “ickstinguish” it all.

The sound of footsteps.

By the sight of it–no, the sound of it, these were faint footsteps.

But it was a large sound to Nadeko.

A gigantic, massive sound.

The footsteps sounded to Nadeko like a “bahemoth” was “discending” on her.

Hopeless footsteps that seemed to destroy everything, turn everything upside down–

"…!"

And at that moment, it was blown away.

What was? Well, the shrine.

The shrine whose floor Nadeko was hiding under.

It was blown away–um, you know the story of the Three Little Pigs, right? i haven't read it since i was little so i don't remember the details too well, but i'm pretty sure there's a house in it that a Mister Wolf blows down.

i recall being shocked by his lung capacity. What big lungs Mister Wolf must have, i thought, but that's exactly what i just got to see.

Maybe that story isn't make-believe, either.

Still, we're talking about a wooden structure here, not a straw house.

It couldn't have been sheer lung capacity, of course–

"Daydreaming about fairy tales in the middle of this crisis, Nadeko? I'm amazed–I always thought of you as the delicate type, but just look at those tough nerves of yours. Maybe it means you've learned how to detach your heart from your mind–*hsshh hsshh.* If that's the case, I was right to pick you as my partner. I wasn't sure about it from the very start to the very end, but I'm finally certain now, here at the very, very, very end."

No.

That's just crazy.

Mister Serpent didn't pick Nadeko as his partner to begin with–neither the Serpent nor Nadeko had any choice at all.

Just crazy.

i feel a broken piece of the shrine fly past above Nadeko's head, but she doesn't look up, she keeps her arms around her knees–Nadeko doesn't even flinch.

"Come on, dear, don't look away from reality–just how long do you plan to sit there staring at the ground? You can close your eyes, avert them, hide them, cast them down, but none of it is going to make reality disappear. You must know that, you must have learned that by now–hmmmm?"

That goes without saying.

Because Nadeko–did want to make reality disappear and go away, but wasn't able to.

Nadeko knows.

But what Nadeko doesn't know, again–is why things turned out like this.

Now that the roof is gone–though technically it's the floor, not the roof–well, with the entire shrine gone, it's also correct to say the roof is–i finally realize it's raining.

And it's a big downpour.

A squall.

A cloudburst.

…Nadeko's thoughts nearly turn to how well put "cloudburst" is, but i don't even need any snarky remarks from Mister Serpent to know that this is no time for that.

In an instant, though, i'm drenched.

Maybe that's exactly what i need.

Even if her clothes get heavy from soaking up water, it doesn't really matter to Nadeko now, and also–this rain that started to pour all of a sudden will probably hide Nadeko's tears.

"All of a sudden? C'mon, Nadeko, your memories are getting all muddled–hmmmm? Didn't you climb under the shrine floor to take shelter from the rain? It was all well and good when you ran away and came to this mountain, but then it started to rain on top of that–"

"Is…that what happened?"

i forget. Nadeko's mind is absent.

My memories are "muddeled."

Well, if the Serpent says so, it's probably true–but putting aside the "verasity" of this or that, the best word to describe Nadeko these days might just be "muddeled."

Mixed up.

Muddied.

Nadeko really is muddeled right now.

Soggy and swampy.

"You might be muddled, but your mind does seem clear to me–yeah, that's just my opinion. *Hsshh hsshh,* even now you look pretty coolheaded to me."

Coolheaded?

Nadeko?

Is that true?

"Oh, right, maybe I should say coldblooded–since you're able to pick out his footsteps even in this downpour."

"…"

True.

Right.

Nadeko's eyes could be facing the ground–the sound of the pouring rain could try to drown it out, but still.

His footsteps.

These footsteps.

The approaching footsteps–Nadeko can identify.

Cannot but identify.

Because he's–very dear to her.

Someone Nadeko loves.

"Hey, Sengoku."

Throb.

He calls Nadeko's name–and she can feel her heart shake.

i can feel it throbbing and pounding and shaking.

i'm surprised that i still have something like a heart left, and i'm embarrassed that i'm reacting this way.

Oh.

So i still had emotions.

It's so embarrassing.

i just want to disappear.

"What's the matter? Look at me, Sengoku."

"…"

It takes those words.

But Nadeko finally looks up.

i wanted to sit frozen there for the rest of my life, like a rock, like i was petrified–but those words from him are all it takes. Nadeko's body doesn't lie.

No.

This must be what Nadeko wanted from the beginning.

i hid. i ran.

But even so–it must have been because Nadeko wanted him to find her.

i must have wanted him to chase after Nadeko.

i must have wanted him to save Nadeko.

And.

And i must have wanted him to get rid of Nadeko–

"I'm here to kill you–Sengoku."

That line.

That captivating line. It makes Nadeko feel like she's going to melt.

Nadeko's body just has to react to it–to his now visible figure.

To Koyomi Araragi's figure.

Big Brother Koyomi's figure–i can see it.

i can see him clearly, even in this blinding rain.

Clearly.

Yes, so clearly.

"*Hsshh hsshh*–you know there's not any kind of emotional reason that you can see him, right? You're just sensing Big Brother Koyomi's body heat with the snake's signature pit organ–" the Serpent butts in.

But i can’t complain.

It’s Mister Serpent’s job to butt in.

“–Because you’re a snake now, dear–and a wonderfully poisonous one, too.”

“…”

Of course, the Serpent’s voice doesn’t reach Koyomi–and the Serpent is just butting in.

Because Nadeko can see him clearly.

No matter what the Serpent says.

i can see him clearly.

It doesn’t have anything to do with a pit organ or whatever–Nadeko can see Big Brother Koyomi clearly.

“Didn’t I just tell you to stop looking away from reality? Listen to me, that’s not possible.”

He’s right.

Of course.

Because his is a figure i’ve been chasing–for nearly six years.

He’s someone Nadeko always turned her eyes from but never stopped watching.

His tattered school uniform. His disheveled hair.

There’s barely an unwounded spot on his exposed skin–and the bleeding from none of the wounds shows any signs of stopping.

Koyomi’s left arm has been cruelly ripped off of him, too. No, strictly speaking, it’s connected by the skin–but that connection is so unreliable that Big Brother’s arm might fall to the ground if he twists his body even a bit.

Koyomi says that he's a vampire.

A bloodsucking demon.

He wasn't always, but apparently he is one now.

That's what he told Nadeko when we were reunited, and he's even showed her the skills that come along with it–but as far as i can see, his powers of recovery from being a vampire don't seem to be working at all.

"C'mon, Nadeko. What a horrible way to put it," the Serpent says immediately. "Aren't you the one who left your vampire Big Brother in this awful state?" He never misses a chance to jump in with a quip. "Because poison is even effective on vampires. The fangs you stuck in him are still there. He hasn't pulled them out."

"…Oh. Really?"

Yeah.

Yes, really.

It was Nadeko. It's Nadeko's–fault.

There's no room for excuses, no extenuating circumstances.

It was Nadeko's fault.

"In that case…i guess i really need to fight him," i say.

i slowly rise.

In Nadeko's right hand is Mister Serpent. In her left is a giant fang.

i rise–with poison in my heart.

My soaked bangs slide at the motion–no, Nadeko's body is already prepared to fight, regardless of her will.

If i had to say if Koyomi is black or white, he'd be black–and facing her staggeringly black, vampiric Big Brother.

Nadeko's hair is standing on end.

Each one of those hairs–a snake.

A swarm of snakes.

A writhing tangle of snakes.

Yes.

It's not just Mister Serpent.

Nadeko is now–joined by a hundred thousand snakes.

Nadeko is toothless to impose her will on the mass of them–and they're the ones who will do the biting anyway.

No.

That's not true.

These are just more excuses–a hundred thousand of them.

Nadeko set them off, and Nadeko caused them, too.

They're the fault of one individual, Nadeko Sengoku.

I'm at fault.

I'm the one who was enwrapped by the snake.

The one who let it crawl into *my* heart.

"Hmph. Naught but an aberration body and soul. She hath fallen so, 'twould appear–though in this case we might choose to say ascended."

A voice.

The somewhat old-timey words come from a young blond girl who i only now notice, but it seems like she's been by Koyomi's side this whole time.

“And now at last I see why that Hawaiian-shirted boy always insisted that I be careful with this forelocked girl. Though I suppose she’s no forelocked girl now, but a snake-locked one. Nay–perhaps I should say a snake-god girl.”

“…”

“Come on, now,” the blond girl says to Koyomi.

The words are relaxed, like the two are close.

As if they’re partners.

“Don’t ye shilly-shally now. This waif is no longer thy sister’s friend, nor is she thy adorable little junior–she is a wicked, fiendish, and hopeless aberration. Just *another* snake,” emphasizes the blond girl–Miss Shinobu Oshino.

“Yeah, I know that,” Koyomi nods in reply.

As if they understand each other perfectly.

He continues.

“We’re looking at my enemy–and your food.”

“…”

“Go ahead and eat her, Shinobu.”

As he says this.

Koyomi and Miss Shinobu–take off in Nadeko’s direction, despite the still-pouring rain, no special signal needed, not even a wink.

i’m so jealous, Nadeko thinks.

Of who? Miss Shinobu.

That’s where Nadeko wanted to be, really.

Right by Big Brother Koyomi’s side.

i wanted to be his partner.

Even if we couldn't be each other's lover, i at least wanted us to be at each other's side.

So why is Nadeko–standing face-to-face with him like this?

i don't know. i don't know.

i don't know–why is Nadeko–

Why am *I*–

Opposing him?

"I hate you, Big Brother Koyomi!"

Nadeko swings the giant fang in her left hand–and it strikes directly at Koyomi's heart.

i knew how powerful it would be.

And *by god,* is it powerful.

They say that you can end a vampire's life by sticking a simple stake of wood into its heart–so what about a fang from a white snake?

Nadeko's beloved.

The heart of Nadeko's once beloved–ah.

It scatters in the air.

Its muscles and blood come raining down on Nadeko.

Like rain.

Like a torrent.

"Woo-hoo! Looks like you really did it now, Nadeko!" the Serpent roars.

A hundred thousand snakes raise shouts of victory.

No.

i think it might have been Nadeko's own voice, after all.

Because–Nadeko Sengoku is laughing now.

Even though she wants so much to cry.

Even though she is crying–Nadeko is laughing.

"Aha," she laughs.

She laughs, and laughs, and laughs, and laughs, and laughs.

What else can she do, it's so funny–

"Ahahahaha… Ahaha, ahahahaha!"

Oh, really.

Why did things turn out this way–why?

Why.

003

The story goes back a thousand years.

…Is that too far back?

i guess it is, heheh.

Really, Nadeko doesn't know much about what happened a thousand years ago, either–and what i have heard is from Mister Serpent, so it's hardly demonstrative evidence.

The way that word "demonstrative" starts with "demons" makes it seem somehow aberration-ish, but that's a different topic.

You shouldn't swallow anything the Serpent tells you without chewing on it first–since we're dealing with a snake, maybe i should say "swallow *whole*."

What happened a thousand years ago doesn't really interest Nadeko, anyway.

Um.

So we're just going to go back to something that Nadeko can speak of from her own experience–in other words, back to the day i met the Serpent.

That should make the story demonstratively true.

To Nadeko, at least.

There might be a few mistakes in the way i remember it, or actually there must be, but there are a lot of things in this world that can't be forgotten no matter how hard you try, and a lot of things in this world that you can't cover up even with a lie, and for Nadeko, her meeting with Mister Serpent is one example.

After all.

Nadeko was already dragging along snakes from her past–dragging along snakes that used to be wound around her.

Almost audibly dragging…and dragging.

Just like Nadeko has dragged along her feelings from elementary school–almost audibly.

All right. The date was October thirty-first, a Tuesday–i guess that would make it Halloween, but to be honest, i'm not too familiar with that event.

i don't really know what kind of day it is.

According to Mister Mèmè Oshino, an authority on monsters and the supernatural who once lived in this town (what does "authority" mean, anyway? Is it like "almighty"?), "Halloween and Thanksgiving ought to take deeper root in Japan. I mean, look at how big Christmas is here now."

That's what he said, but Nadeko doesn't really understand Thanksgiving, either.

But i do think that giving thanks is important.

i'm thankful to Mister Oshino.

And to Miss Kanbaru, and to Big Brother Koyomi.

i'm thankful.

i wouldn't be leading such a calm and peaceful life now if it wasn't for them–wait, calm and peaceful?

No.

What they taught Nadeko in June might be that there's no such thing as a calm and peaceful life in this world.

Peace.

That kind of stuff only exists on TV.

One Peace.

Isn’t there a manga called that?

It was fun to read.

While i wish i could live a peaceful life, i don’t think it would be possible in Nadeko’s reality.

i don’t think it would be possible at Nadeko’s school.

In fact, i was already “meloncholy” the morning of October thirty-first–no, Nadeko being meloncholy wasn’t limited to that day.

Mornings are always meloncholy.

More specifically, the walk to school is always meloncholy–whether it’s the thrity-first, the thirtieth, or the first.

Whether it’s October, September, or November–yes.

There’s never a walk to school that isn’t meloncholy.

Not since that day.

Not since June.

It was different in April, you see.

It was probably still different in May, too.

i want to say that the famed fraud Deishu Kaiki came to this town because he was tracking rumors of the vampire known as Miss Shinobu Oshino, and the gears might have already been turning in April or May–but it wasn’t until June that they started having an actual effect, including what happened with Nadeko–

“Whoa, watch–”

And then.

Despite her meloncholy, Nadeko decided to head to middle school with lots of time to spare so that she wouldn't be late. But just as i turn a corner, a bike plows toward Nadeko.

A bicycle. Basically a light car. Not a so-called granny bike like what Big Brother Koyomi rides (to judge from it, he isn't particular about bicycles in the least), but a fairly stylish BMX bike.

Nadeko freezes and thinks, *Ah, so i'm just going to get run over like this, i'm probably going to be sent to the hospital with broken bones, it looks like it's going to hurt, but i won't have to go to school for a while, maybe Big Brother will come to visit, Nadeko had better get her best pajamas ready*–this "kalaidoscope" of images from the future runs through Nadeko's head, but the rider of the bike continues:

"Watch–me go!" and turns the bike's handlebars in a somewhat unreasonable direction.

Imagine a T created by the bike's front wheel and its frame.

While the brakes may not have been applied in time, this was, structurally speaking, no different from the bike slamming into a wall.

Honestly, i think you could have dodged a person as petite as Nadeko with nothing more than a slight tilt of the handlebars–but i'm sure the rider was desperate.

The front wheel stops, but the back wheel continues on.

It leaps into the air.

The bike ends up clearing Nadeko's head…no, grazes it even as it misses her.

One Leap–there's no such manga, though.

After that, both the bike and its rider go sliding along the asphalt like two spinning fireworks–but not only does Nadeko have no broken bones, she isn't even scratched.

Still, i've turned pale.

…While it all happens in a moment, Nadeko's never been more scared in her life–it was a terrifying experience. Yes, monsters and ghosts and those kinds of things are scary, but the real, concrete fear that is a traffic accident instantly outdoes those kinds of psychological scares.

If only for a moment, i forget the meloncholy Nadeko feels on her way to school.

"A-Are you okay?!"

Nadeko suddenly comes to her senses and runs toward where the bike lies sideways on the street–not because i'm worried about any damage to the bike itself, of course, but because i'm trying to get to the girl sandwiched against the ground by her bike.

It's a girl.

While the Road Traffic Act would fault the rider for not looking both ways before speeding forward, it's also true that Nadeko wasn't paying attention when she was walking–no, i'm worried no matter whose fault it is.

Of course i'm worried, someone has fallen to the ground. You could say that she just fell over on her bike, which isn't much of an accident, but it could be a big deal if she hit her head.

It might be a good idea to call an ambulance.

Nadeko doesn't have a cell phone, though.

Pay phones have been disappearing from town lately, too, so in order to call for help, i would have to run into one of the homes

around here and–oh, but Nadeko isn't able to talk to people she doesn't know.

In that case, she'd have to go back home first and–

"–I'm good!"

"Aaah!" i scream.

Just as i run over to the girl, she suddenly sits up as if she has a spring-loaded torso. No, while i likened it to a spring mechanism due to the momentum, Nadeko would say she seemed more like a zombie–because the girl was definitely limp and immobile a second earlier.

Yes.

Like–all of the times that Koyomi is dead.

…

i have to say, "all of the times that he's dead" is a pretty unique phrase.

"Are you hurt, Sengoku?" the girl looks at Nadeko and asks.

She has a pleasant smile on her face. She looks very likable.

But Nadeko can't help but be anything but afraid of that smile–because.

"Hmm? What's the matter, Sengoku? I thought I managed to dodge you, but don't tell me I grazed a hair or two on your head! Well, I'm real sorry if I did, Sengoku."

"Wh-Why…"

i have a hard time voicing the word. No, Nadeko is reserved and shy and ends up talking to everyone this way… But i have an even harder time saying anything to this person today.

i'm "inordinetly" afraid.

i guess you can put it that way.

“Wh-Why… Nadeko’s name…”

“Hm?”

“Why…do you know…Nadeko’s name?”

“Hmmm?”

The girl’s eyes open wide.

She has on the same likable smile, but–it’s clearly stiff.

It’s like her face is telling you how much she just messed up.

“That’s right!” she exclaims, looking up to the sky. “Agh, I haven’t met you yet, Sengoku!”

“Huh?”

“Sheesh… I got the order all wrong… This is all because I’m having such a tough time finding Hachikuji… There’s something way too irregular about that girl. What a nuisance. Oh, what should I do?” the girl says, getting up and doing the same for her bicycle.

She starts anew.

“Nice to meet you, cute missy!”

She’s too late by any measure.

Though i am “bold over” by her guts.

“My name’s Ogi Oshino!”

“…Oshino?”

Oshino? Oshino…

Mèmè Oshino–Shinobu Oshino.

No, that’s not it.

She said her name was Ogi Oshino.

i haven’t heard it before–could the family name just be a coincidence?

“Uhh, how should I pretend that didn’t happen? I guess I just need to mention Araragi-*senpai* to her? Okay, then. Um, Sengoku, I heard about you from Araragi-senpai, my senior. You can tell by my uniform, right? That makes me his junior, and Miss Kanbaru’s junior, too. Not his jeweler, his junior. I’m a freshman at Naoetsu High.”

“…”

Her story’s full of holes.

You could even say that she’s lost the plot.

Anyone would find it hard to speak to someone like her, not just Nadeko.

Still, Big Brother’s junior?

Not his jeweler.

And Miss Kanbaru’s junior–true, she’s wearing a Naoetsu High uniform, the same school that Big Brother Koyomi and Miss Kanbaru attend.

Even i think i’m being stupid.

That’s all it takes to make Nadeko relax a little. All i needed to hear is that this Class-A suspicious individual, suspicious as can be, goes to school with Koyomi, and she suddenly seems somewhat trustworthy. That’s what makes Nadeko think that really, i’m stupid.

i doubt the thought brought any visible change in Nadeko’s attitude, though.

i’m just nervously looking at the ground, like always.

Not saying anything.

When i'm quiet like this, most people give up and walk off somewhere, with a *Forgeddit.* That's the "president" that's been set.

That's the pattern. But.

"Didn't work, huh?" the girl–Miss Ogi–says, looking back up at the sky.

She won't give up on me, won't walk off.

She continues, like she's "gryping."

"Look at that, I messed things up from the very start. Whatever. Your case is basically like a side story. I doubt it'll turn out like it did with Tsubasa of the Hanekawas–um."

And then.

Miss Ogi extends her right hand to Nadeko.

"You see, I'm Mèmè Oshino's niece."

"…"

"I heard about you from my uncle, too–about how you were a victim. I guess it's because Kaiki was involved, but you know, when it comes to aberrations, a pure victim is pretty rare."

However, adds Miss Ogi, her tone bright and clear.

"People can't be victims forever–Sengoku. There are just times when we're victims and times when we're victimizers, that's all. Or do you still think of yourself as a victim?"

"…"

"No reaction, huh?" She shrugs. Almost like she's having fun. "Yes, maybe you can always be a victim if you act that way, looking at the ground, staying silent, not speaking a word–*but how well is that going to go for you this time, I wonder?*"

"…"

“This time–just might be an exception.”

“…”

“Yeah, it really is nice and easy being a victim. You get everyone’s sympathy, and they’re all so nice to you. You sometimes hear people talk about how we write off victims, but really, they’re just saying that the victimizers are victims, too–I think my uncle hated that way of thinking, but, well, maybe there are only victims in this world. In which case, if you turn it around again, then from the start, you mightn’t have been a pure victim, either–and who knows, that could come to light in this tale.”

“…T-Tale?”

“Uh huh,” Miss Ogi confirms. “Sengoku, don’t tell me you think your everyday life lacks any sort of narrative.”

See ya.

Miss Ogi gets on her bike–it seems like the fall didn’t cause any particular technical issues–spins the pedals, and rides kind of like she’s doing a stunt to leave the scene.

Like always.

i believe.

Nadeko isn’t good at talking, so people give up on her and leave–always.

She didn’t treat Nadeko to a *Forgeddit,* but the result was the same as always.

The pattern that’s the “president.”

It’s no surprise.

It shouldn’t be.

But.

“…Hm?”

Although it’s no surprise–i am left with the feeling that something’s a little off, really, only just a little.

So slightly off that i’ll probably forget it by tomorrow and never remember.

But despite my impression that we didn’t talk for that long, i notice that somehow–according to Nadeko’s watch, quite a lot of time seems to have passed.

How do i explain it?

Almost like time has been stolen away.

i don’t think the conversation with Miss Ogi was so much fun that it made Nadeko lose track of time–so why is it?

Why is it–that i feel like i’m going to have to talk to that person again–in time?

No.

To jump ahead, i’ll have as close as possible to no chance at all of doing that after this–because before Nadeko can meet her again.

Big Brother Koyomi and i are going to end up fighting to the death.

004

By the way, Nadeko ignored Miss Ogi's outstretched right hand a moment ago–but that's not to say i didn't actually look at it.

Avoiding Miss Ogi's eyes, casting mine down, i did see her hand–in fact, you could say her hand was all i could see exactly because i was looking down. Unless i was mistaken, Miss Ogi seemed to want to shake Nadeko's hand.

While she pulled hers back with a smile as if nothing happened, it'd normally offend people.

No, i think i must have offended Miss Ogi.

All of that hard-to-understand stuff she brought up before leaving, about victims and victimizers, about everyday life and narratives, might have been her way of spiting Nadeko for her rudeness.

Making people feel uneasy by insinuating things is a common and effective tactic in conversations.

But.

Nadeko can't do it.

She can't, even if it offends people.

She can't be touched by people.

She can't touch people.

A handshake is out of the question, and i can't stand physical contact like being tapped on the face or arm, either–it makes Nadeko flinch.

It makes Nadeko flinch and flinch.

No nudging Nadeko.

That’s a Nade-no-no.

i know i’m taking this too far, but i think i’d prefer getting hit.

Because getting hit only takes a moment–there’s not enough time for us to mix.

Mix what? Our temperature. Body heat.

That’s right.

Nadeko can’t stand other people’s body heat–she can’t stand the warmth of human skin. Nadeko can’t begin to stand her body heat mixing with somebody else’s.

For example, the warmth from someone’s hand–or maybe the chill–from shaking it is just too stressful.

It makes Nadeko break out in a cold sweat.

To keep going into the details, that could be why Nadeko’s actually fine when people touch her over her clothes.

“An excessive dislike of contact with others is a manifestation of a strong sense of self-consciousness. It would follow that while you seem quiet, Sengoku, you might in fact have a strong will that refuses to rely on others.”

–That’s what Miss Hanekawa told Nadeko when i asked her for advice, but i think she was being kind.

i think she was being tactful.

All i really am is a coward.

Nadeko is even afraid of relying on people, that’s all.

Of course, if you were to ask Nadeko how she saw it, everyone else seems a lot stranger–why do they do it?

Why are they so ready to let their guard down around others? And to be touched?

Nadeko doesn’t want people touching her, and she doesn’t lower her guard.

All right, i’ve made it to school. i have arrived.

Nadeko’s traffic accident with Miss Ogi (or Miss Ogi’s accident with herself, as it played out) didn’t make her late–while we may have spoken for a lot longer than i thought, Nadeko always leaves home quite early so that no matter what kind of trouble she encounters on the way to school, she’ll be fine.

Of course, i only started looking out for trouble like this after what happened in June.

Maybe i didn’t get any more cautious and am just being my usual timid self.

…Speaking of which.

i wasn’t too bothered when that happened.

That experience of a snake wrapping itself around Nadeko’s bare skin–oh, right.

It’s like i learned in science class. Snakes are coldblooded–so body temperature doesn’t really come into play with them.

Today is October thirty-first. We haven’t seen snow yet, but it’s easily cold enough to say that it’s already winter–it’s so chilly out. In fact, snakes, which are reptiles, might already be hibernating.

Nadeko enters her school and changes her shoes.

From outdoor to indoor shoes.

Nadeko can’t reach her Year 2, Class 2 shoe cupboard, second row from the top, without stretching a little–i wish i was a little taller every time i arrive at or leave school, in other words, every time i use this cupboard.

Nadeko takes off her shoes, stands on the wooden slats next to the cupboards, and reaches.

Nadeko's fingers poke around the cupboard and–

"Ee…aghh!" i scream again. It's the second time today.

Nadeko's voice is usually small, but her screams are, of course, loud.

While i froze when Miss Ogi nearly ran Nadeko over, her bottom falls right to the floor this time around.

A somewhat indecent pose.

A certain kind of observer might have seen a girl overstretching, losing her balance, and slipping on the smooth slats because she was wearing socks. Like a dummy.

But it was something else. That wasn't it.

Unable to get up, Nadeko looks at her right hand–the hand that was just poking around her cubby.

"…"

Nothing seems to be wrong with her right hand, and Nadeko's eyes turn to the cupboard next–but all i see is a plain old cupboard.

Nadeko's indoor shoes are poking out a bit.

So she can't see it.

There's no–white snake there.

"…"

But i could feel it.

Nadeko might call it a familiar feeling–that of *a snake wrapping around her bare skin.*

Soft yet hard.

Smooth but scaly.

And while it has no body heat.

You can feel its vitality–that *enwrapment.*

"…"

Fearfully.

Nadeko gets up, stands on her toes, and tries to look inside her shoe cupboard–but i don't have the height for it, after all.

It would be nice if i had a platform to use, but i don't see anything that convenient.

Nadeko's only choice is to use her nails to nervously pull her indoor shoes, nearly falling out of their cupboard, down toward her–and to check inside them.

Empty. Nothing's inside.

No socks, no human ankles, and of course–no white snake.

It's not there, nor do i see it.

"…"

Sure, Nadeko has fewer friends than the average person, she's reserved and silent, and she's such a bad girl that she doesn't like human contact and even thinks it's gross, but it's not like i've been particularly bullied–so i don't see why anyone would ever put a snake in Nadeko's shoe cubby.

Actually, that would go beyond bullying. i'd be scared of anyone who'd do that, more than any bullying.

Um, so what i'm trying to say is that Nadeko doesn't matter enough to be subjected to a prank as elaborate as a live snake snuck inside her shoe cubby.

Being hated is its own kind of talent, a fine personality trait.

Even what happened in June–was all kinds of stuff happening without Nadeko's involvement.

While Mister Oshino and Miss Ogi this morning called Nadeko a "victim"–i think you could say that Nadeko isn't even a victim.

Maybe the word is bystander.

It just feels more on the mark.

Given the miserable condition of Nadeko's second-year class–i can't help but think so.

That's right.

It's not about Nadeko's personality or character–there's *no way that any bullying could take place* in Year 2, Class 2 right now.

"…Maybe it was Nadeko's imagination."

Just to be sure, i hop up and down a few times to take a (tiny) peek inside Nadeko's shoe cupboard, but nothing seems out of the ordinary after all.

It's strange, though.

If it was Nadeko's imagination, it was Nadeko's imagination, and i of course would prefer it that way–we'd have a happy ending, so why? If that sense of being enwrapped by a snake was all in Nadeko's head–then why did she feel that a snake she couldn't even see was a *white* snake?

"What's the matter, Sengoku? Is everything all right?" a girl in Nadeko's year calls out to her, worried about (what must look like) the bizarre way she's acting by the shoe cupboards.

"i'm fine," Nadeko replies in a tiny voice and looks at her feet. "i'm fine."

i don't know if Nadeko spoke loudly enough, but the girl seems persuaded and proceeds to her classroom–the two of us are

assigned to different classes, so she naturally heads to a different one from Nadeko's.

Nadeko's shoe cupboard is for Year 2, Class 2, so there are of course a few students from class around–but they don't bother saying anything about her bizarre behavior.

They don't even look in her direction, they don't even speak to one another. They just head to our classroom.

Yes.

This is how it is.

The current state of Year 2, Class 2.

A meloncholic school life, in other words.

005

If you asked Nadeko whose fault it is, I'd say no one in particular…but if we had to vote anonymously on who caused this situation, i think the unanimous answer would be Mister Deishu Kaiki, the swindler.

He'd be elected for sure.

Well, i know i'm making it sound like we're acquaintances, but Nadeko has never met that man.

Still, we're more than acquaintances.

If i were to describe our relationship, i'd say he is a Very Important Person to Nadeko. A VIP.

Aside from Nadeko's family, Big Brother Koyomi, and Tsukihi, he's left a bigger impression than anyone else in her life–i mean, it's his fault that Nadeko's life went the wrong way.

That it slipped off the tracks. And fell to pieces.

…

Wait, is this what they call making yourself out as the victim?

Uh oh, let Nadeko correct herself.

It was everything around Nadeko that went the wrong way.

And slipped off the tracks. And fell to pieces.

Not Nadeko, but everything around her.

Nadeko has always lived her life the way she lives it now–from long before Mister Kaiki ever visited this town.

Only.

The classmates around Nadeko got–*just like* Nadeko. That's really all that happened.

So if i had to say, the victims were Nadeko's classmates.

This might be getting off topic, but i think it's important, so i'm going to talk a little bit about the past.

We'll keep it simple.

It was June.

Actually, it was a page out of Mister Kaiki's Fraud Files, with which Nadeko isn't too familiar–so some of this will be what i heard from Tsukihi and her sister, the Fire Sisters of Tsuganoki Second Middle School.

Mister Deishu Kaiki is a psychic who calls himself a ghostbuster.

The easy way to explain it would be to say that he's in the same line of work as Mister Oshino, but their natures seem somewhat different, and apparently Mister Kaiki uses his psychic powers for the sole purpose of making money.

Calling him a fake spiritualist would be "brayzen."

But i ought to be brayzen here.

This year, he put down roots in the town that Nadeko and the rest of us live in–and he decided to target its middle schoolers.

To put that in a brayzen way too, he didn't put down roots, he made his nest here.

His scam was selling fake charms to a large number of random middle schoolers–as far as money goes, he honestly didn't ask for much.

A price you could manage on an allowance.

It was the Kaiki way of doing business, low margins and high volume.

There were of course some kids who took it too far, which became a problem and made the Fire Sisters act–but as time passed, it was the majority of scams, affordable on an allowance and not particularly problematic, that became the true problem.

Yes.

It would have been better if they'd turned into actual cases–like with Nadeko.

i think that's why Nadeko has been able to live the same way (still gloomy) before and after the case–with no changes to her personality.

Resolving something that has become a full-blown *case* serves as an important, they say, "*richual"*–and so.

And so those of Nadeko's classmates who didn't experience it as a case and *never partook in* a richual–who were vaguely able to manage it, are living out their school lives still feeling uncertain.

Being "obscur" like this won't get across what i mean by "feeling uncertain," so i'm going to be kind of straightforward about it. In a nutshell, things about the class like–

Who likes who

Who hates who

How someone feels about someone else

What someone wants to do to someone else

–and other kinds of "thoughts about everyone" that go beyond even the level of personal info were all "dievulged."

The "charms" that Mister Kaiki turned into a fad were for middle schoolers and were all basically about relationships–yes.

The phony charms Mister Kaiki sold were so fake that they were *barely* effective–meaning, terribly enough, that they brought no results and left the causes lying around.

Finding out how people they thought were friends really felt, learning the true motives driving people who were nice to them–how could that not affect a relationship, and how could that not affect the way you socialize?

…You can guess how the rest went, for the most part.

Mister Kaiki's goal wasn't to ruin relationships, of course–the only thing he was after was middle schoolers' money.

It was business.

And of course, Mister Kaiki didn't specifically target Nadeko's class–he was targeting all the middle schoolers in town.

But i guess you could call it a trick of fate? No, i don't think it's anything that overblown, it's just a plain old coincidence–but for whatever reason, the charms Mister Kaiki sold were a gigantic hit in Nadeko's class.

If it had been the flu, our whole class would have had to stay home.

The result of it all is Nadeko's current meloncholic school life–a class where everyone's stiff and uncertain, where no one can speak from the heart, a peaceful class in appearance only.

No matter what you say, people think you're lying, that you're saying it for show and actually feel a different way–

A class without cases.

Where nothing happens.

Where everyone pretends to be asleep.

Where no one wants to do anything.

Everyone must be looking forward to their new class assignments next year–it can't get any worse than it already is, and Nadeko can't deny feeling the same way.

i do wonder if anything can be done about it.

But i also think nothing can be.

There's nothing to be done anymore.

"…"

Good morning–i consider uttering the words but can't as i enter the classroom, silent as always–some students looked Nadeko's way as she entered while others didn't react, but that really doesn't bother her much anymore.

i'm used to it.

It feels like boarding a train from a station platform, and i am now used to the mood.

Slouching so that she doesn't stand out, Nadeko heads to her seat.

There's going to be a quiz during homeroom this morning, so she needs to prepare.

"……"

…i don't scream this time.

It's the third time, after all.

i'm in class, too–screaming on a train would draw people's looks, wouldn't it?

Well, this did make three times that i was on the verge of screaming, but it was only the second in terms of snakes.

From inside Nadeko's desk–appeared a white snake, this time in plain sight.

It crawls and squirms out, baring its fangs.

But it disappears a moment later.

Nadeko sits down in her chair like nothing happened and starts preparing for the quiz–then again, Nadeko might not have screamed even if it were the first time.

After all, this class is already being constricted by something like a snake.

i'm not going to scream just because a snake wraps itself around Nadeko–so long as it doesn't bite her.

006

…Still, that composure didn't last for long.

It wasn't a question of getting used to it.

How could you not feel beaten down when a white snake wrapped itself around you after crawling out of your shoes, your pencil case, your gym clothes bag, the cleaning supplies locker, the corner of the hall, and even the cracks of your textbook and notebook? Of course you're going to buckle.

i'm not surprised anymore. But it is tiring.

i'm exhausted and i'm sick of it.

It feels like i'm opening a huge line of jack-in-the-boxes, one after another.

Being forced to keep opening the boxes, knowing that something's going to happen when i do, is kind of like "torchure."

They're hallucinations.

i think.

While i felt like everything was fine, all of the stress sitting in Nadeko's heart as she led her meloncholic school life could have caused her to start seeing a white snake. To compare it to a famous example, they say a manga author who was tired started seeing a white alligator.

But–if they aren't hallucinations.

If it's "that stuff."

…It does seem possible.

According to Mister Mèmè Oshino, an expert, "Meet an aberration and you'll be drawn by aberrations." If you get involved

with aberrations even once, it's apparently easier to get involved with them again.

It hasn't ever happened to Nadeko outside of June–but maybe her first time has come.

Nadeko's first time, which is to say her second time.

It scares her, of course it does.

But i was ready for it.

i thought this day might come–in fact, those days back when nothing happened were almost scarier.

Something happening can be easier on you than thinking something might happen.

Having to wait for it is more stressful.

That's a lesson Nadeko learns every day in class.

That isn't to say that Nadeko has any way of dealing with it.

Actually, when Nadeko tried to deal with this kind of situation on her own in the past, with some self-taught half-knowledge (or not even that, it was just reading in the aisles of a bookstore), things only got worse.

It would have been fine if i'd left it alone.

But i couldn't–and it went horribly.

i met a horrible fate.

That's why Nadeko waited until after class to use the school's public phone to call Big Brother Koyomi and give him the details.

There's something he told Nadeko once.

If she ever needed help with aberrations, she should call him right away.

So i called him.

“A snake? A snake, huh.”

But to be honest, his reaction gave Nadeko doubts.

Maybe, having gotten too used to surprises, Nadeko didn’t sound like she’s in enough of a crisis–and ought to have called him back when she first saw (felt) a white snake in the shoe cupboard.

Because that was the only time i can say i was genuinely surprised.

“The snake from before?”

“Nuh-uh… Not that one. A different one.”

i have trouble speaking.

Please don’t underestimate Nadeko. Just because i’m talking to Big Brother Koyomi doesn’t mean i’m going to be eloquent.

i get worked up no matter who i’m talking to. Even if it’s Nadeko’s parents.

“The snake from before was…i don’t know…right, i couldn’t see it. But i can actually see this one… Oh, i couldn’t the first time, but now i do…”

“Hmph…”

Nadeko’s words are all over the place, even by her own standards, but Koyomi stood strong and listened.

He is a gutsy man.

“So there’s been no actual harm yet? If we’re going to compare this to last time, it’s not like it’s constricting your body or anything–”

“Y-Yeah. It’s not,” Nadeko nods, biting.

It’s almost like Nadeko is a snake, heh.

Nadeko was making the call because she didn't want to cause any worries, but it feels like that's exactly what i've done. Though Koyomi has mean-looking eyes, his face is pretty emotive. It's easy to figure out the way he feels when you're talking to him in person, but i have no idea what he's thinking right now on the phone.

And when Nadeko doesn't know that, it's hard for her to get her mouth going.

It's hard for her to get her brain going, too.

How might Nadeko explain the situation she's been placed in?

…Placed?

Has Nadeko been placed in it?

"When there's a crack, or a space that's closed off…that's where it suddenly appears."

"Hmph… So this snake shows up in places that you 'couldn't see until now'? Well, yeah, snakes are known for lurking. They hate bright places or something," Koyomi follows up like he's examining what Nadeko said. "Maybe this aberration is a spooker? You know, just surprising humans for no good reason…"

"Aberrations like that exist? Ones that just surprise people…" Like faceless ghosts? No, the *noppera-bo* has its own roots, and i want to say they were pretty sad, too. i feel like i read about them when i was looking stuff up.

"Well, *yokai* stories are basically ways to explain the inexplicable…and people are surprised by the inexplicable. It's no different from someone coming out of the shadows and yelling 'Boo!' Aberrations and surprises go hand in hand," Koyomi says.

He kind of sounds like an expert.

It's very cool. He's so great.

Nadeko knows, of course, that he's just taking what he heard from Mister Oshino or Miss Hanekawa, or maybe that blond vampire girl, and repeating it word for word, but i still think he's cool even when you take that into account.

…Though even Nadeko wonders what you have left after you take that into account.

"But…Nadeko was surprised only when it happened with the shoe cupboard."

"You know, Sengoku… I've always thought you're tougher mentally than you seem."

"Really?" Actually, i'm weak.

"I mean, I'm sure I'd never stop being scared if snakes started appearing out of cracks. I'd probably react in nice and charming ways every single time, if I do say so myself."

"That's amazing!"

"…No, it's not… I mean, whatever…" Koyomi is quiet for a moment. "Well, it's not as if all snakes are poisonous. Some are even harmless. Yup…"

I did fail last time with your Jagirinawa, notes Nadeko's Big Brother.

Hm? He failed? Did he fail?

i think he did a perfect job of saving Nadeko back then…

He asks me, "Is there any possible cause you can think of?"

"Cause?"

"Some sort of trigger or something that's making you hallucinate this white snake appearing around you again and again… Do you have any memories of anything, I guess?"

“Any memories…”

Nadeko thinks.

But i can’t come up with anything.

So, nothing in mind, Nadeko tells him.

“i–don’t.”

“Hmm… I know there’s supposed to be a reason for every aberration, but it’s a little different in your case–it was, the last time.”

“…”

“Anyway, if it’s not urgent, we’ll wait until evening.”

“Evening?”

“In other words, we’ll wait until Shinobu wakes up–she’s been following a pretty regular schedule these days. These days, or more like the last two months.”

“Huh… Why?”

“Well, she made a huge mistake the other day…like a real blunder. I mean, more than half of it was my fault, but Shinobu really took it personally and got depressed. It was so bad that for a while, she was extra-polite to me every time we talked.”

“…”

i don’t know what happened, but in short, it seems like being really depressed is making that girl lead a more serious life. Of course, she’s a vampire, which means that a serious and regular schedule means sleeping during the day and waking up at night. That might count as irony.

“Shinobu didn’t help us with your Jagirinawa–but she’s going to have to help us out this time around.”

“…”

It wasn’t that she didn’t help us out, Miss Shinobu Oshino and Big Brother Koyomi weren’t as friendly then as they are now, and i don’t think he even tried asking her.

Nadeko doesn’t know much about the girl but certainly did feel happy when Koyomi reconciled with her.

You can always count on Nadeko’s Big Brother.

“Um… Shi…Miss Shinobu eats aberrations, right?” i’ve heard that’s the kind of vampire she is. An aberration slayer or something. “Does that mean she’ll…eat the white snake Nadeko is seeing?”

“Depending on the case, yes–but it’s not like everything can be solved just by having her eat it. If anything, we need her intelligence. The expert knowledge she imbibed from that guy Oshino. Well, if she still complains about being hungry, I’ll just feed her some Mister Donut, from mouth to mouth.”

“Yes, i see…”

Wait. Mouth-to-mouth?

No, i must have misheard him say: from month to month.

That was a bit of a commitment.

“By the way,” he continues, “she’s been obsessed with baked donuts lately. Humbled or not, she never fails to notice when Mister Donut has something new out. If it’s knowledge we’re after, I’d normally rely on Hanekawa–but of course, she’s gone now.”

“Gone? What happened…to Miss Hanekawa?”

i’m sorry, i should have introduced her earlier. Miss Hanekawa is Nadeko’s Big Brother’s classmate and friend.

He even calls her his savior.

Nadeko hasn’t met her many times, but you don’t have to for long before you think, *Oh, this person is different.*

Altogether different.

So different that i got scared and wanted to run away the first time we met–Koyomi seems to think that Nadeko sped away then because she’s shy and timid, but no matter how shy and timid Nadeko might be, she’s not going to run away from someone she’s meeting for the first time.

In fact, scared of what would happen later, no matter how scary someone is, Nadeko would probably just look at the ground and freeze.

Running away is a decision, an active one in a sense.

Nadeko can’t do that.

And yet i ran straightaway that day–without even looking back once, and that’s because–yes.

It was Miss Hanekawa.

Nadeko could feel it on her skin.

How do i explain it–a body heat–that changed the temperature of everything around us.

A person’s warmth.

i could feel it in the air without even touching her–the amount of heat.

It was like i was looking at a fire.

…i later found out that Miss Hanekawa is a very good person. i’m not as scared of her now as i was back then, but i’m still sure that there’s something different about her–and now Koyomi just has to say her name to make Nadeko flinch.

What happened, i asked.

If anything i meant *what did Miss Hanekawa do now*–though that's rude.

"No, nothing happened. It's just that she's on a trip at the moment."

"A trip?" Nadeko tilts her head at the unexpected answer. A trip? "But school's still in session."

"Yeah… But she took paid leave…"

"Paid leave?!"

i'm shocked.

Do high schools have that kind of a system in place?

Or rather, are those rumors about Miss Hanekawa getting paid to go to school actually true? How frightening.

"Sorry, not paid leave. She requested an absence and got approved…and she's taking a trip for a whole month. It's not like she has to worry about attendance since she's not planning on going to college or getting a job after graduation, but you know how serious my Hanekawa is. She wanted to do everything by the book…"

"Huh… So where did she go on this trip?"

"Around the world."

"Around the world?!"

i'm shocked again.

But this shock is different from last time–because Miss Hanekawa's plan after graduation was, yes, to "see the world" instead of going to college or getting a job.

The rumor is that she felt an affinity for the way Mister Oshino lives, but i don't know if that's true–still.

Around the world?

“S-So…she moved up her schedule?”

“Oh, no. She said that if she’s going to see the world after graduating, she wants to do a run-through while she’s still in school and can tell people she’s a student when they ask who she is.”

“A run-through…”

She really is extraordinary. Doing a location hunt before going to see the world… i guess Nadeko’s assumptions were right.

“Apparently it’s also like a rehearsal… I mean, it’s not like we can’t get in touch with her. She has her cell phone, but I just don’t want to worry her while she’s abroad.”

“…”

It feels like Koyomi’s consideration for Miss Hanekawa isn’t the same as being mindful–he normally wants to call her even when there’s no reason to.

Maybe it’s specifically when he does have a reason that he doesn’t want to call her?

It’s a strange way of relating to someone.

“So…evening?” i ask.

“Yeah. Go home and wait–I’ll call you. Uhh… Shinobu usually wakes up around ten at night… Assume I’ll call you around then.”

“Yes…okay,” i nod to agree with Koyomi’s plan.

Ten at night. i don’t have any plans, of course.

There’s a show on TV that i want to watch, but it’s fine. The HDD is set to record it.

“Call me whenever if anything else happens before then–I don’t think I’ll be able to do anything, but I can at least be near you.”

Near Nadeko.

Does that mean he'll be by Nadeko's side?

"Yes… Thanks. But i think i'll be okay."

No snake is going to scare Nadeko if Koyomi will be there to save her.

i just need to be careful around cracks and shadows, and even if something does happen, the worst of it is that i get surprised.

"So, ten tonight. i'm looking forward to it."

"Hunh?"

Koyomi's reply sounds like a low growl.

Hunh, Nadeko thinks too, though with a different meaning and intonation.

Uh oh, i misspoke.

"Hey, Sengoku–are you sure you're okay? What do you mean, you're looking forward to it… Aren't you in a fix?"

"…Um."

i fall silent.

It's hard for Nadeko to find the words.

It's hard–for Nadeko to find an excuse.

"Maybe I should get over there right now? You sound confused–what you just said worries me. Looking forward to anything that has to do with aberrations…"

"N-No, that's not it…"

i can tell through the receiver that Koyomi is concerned about Nadeko–and Nadeko feels very bad about that.

"…i'm sorry."

But in the end, Nadeko can't explain herself and just apologizes.

Nadeko has a habit of apologizing when she doesn't know what to say–i fall silent or apologize.

That's all Nadeko knows to do when she's in trouble.

The only way she could make it through life.

Don't just be saying sorry whenever you're in trouble, you know–we wouldn't need the police if apologies made everything better, and that maxim is true on a much deeper level than most people think, the exceptional Miss Hanekawa once told Nadeko.

The words made Nadeko gasp.

i haven't been able to act on them at all, though.

i suppose being moved by someone's advice doesn't necessarily change your life.

"i'm sorry…Big Brother Koyomi."

"Er, it's nothing you need to apologize for…"

"It's okay. i'm okay, so…l-let's just meet this evening. U-Um…ten, right?"

"Wait, Sengoku–"

"N-Nadeko's phone card is about to run out. Oh no, it's beeping, it's beeping a lot. It's going beeep, beeep."

Click.

i put the receiver back on the handle.

Nadeko's card comes out of the phone with about half of its balance (i got it as a bonus at Animate. *You're actually using it?!* Koyomi once teased Nadeko.)

Oh dear.

i barely got out of that one… No, that's an awful way to put it when Nadeko worried Big Brother by slipping up and saying something he had every right to be mad about. Not to mention, it was close to the worst possible way to get out of a bad situation.

"…"

Still, i really misspoke there.

i don't even have the words to describe how badly i misspoke.

i'm looking forward to it? Yes, the words that slipped out of Nadeko's mouth were her true feelings, but she should never have given voice to them.

Big Brother Koyomi.

Somewhere in Nadeko's heart–she was happy she was getting to go on another aberration "advencher" with him.

Getting to be saved by Big Brother Koyomi.

Nadeko let herself feel thrilled.

When i saw the white snake–after the first time, i wasn't surprised, probably because there was something i felt even more than fear or shock. Joy.

Now Nadeko gets to ask Big Brother for help.

That was always on her mind. i must have been waiting for the opportunity.

…How embarrassing. But it was my honest feeling.

Nadeko Sengoku wanted to be saved by Big Brother Koyomi–just like that time.

"…"

Really embarrassed that i'm taking advantage of Koyomi's kindness, and gripped with anxiety that Big Brother might have noticed, Nadeko reaches out to grab her phone card.

Then, once again, a white snake appears, from underneath it–i'm not surprised by now, of course, but it's been a little while so it does catch Nadeko off guard and she instinctively pulls back her hand.

When i do, it hits the pay phone, and the receiver falls off the hook–the cord bounces up and down, stretching and shrinking like a snake.

The brief distraction is all that the white snake needs to vanish.

"Oh… i forgot to ask him about Miss Ogi…" As the unrelated thought goes through her mind, Nadeko reaches to grab the receiver. "Seriously, though…what's going on here?"

It's strange.

There's a reason for every aberration–but this time, too, Nadeko can't think of a single thread that ties her to any–

"Come on, my dear little Nadeko, isn't that a bit cold–hmmmm?"

A voice.

It comes–from the receiver, knocked off its hook.

No, impossible.

Nadeko took her phone card out of the machine, and already hung up anyway–what's more, the voice sounded nothing like Koyomi's. How might i put it? There isn't a shred of kindness or caring–it's rough, violent.

"You aren't aware of any reason–that's too much for me to take, you know. Ugh, brats like you with no self-awareness are the most annoying of all–you don't have the first clue who you're trampling on as you go about your life."

“…Wh-Who…”

Nadeko brings the receiver close to her face and calls to the voice.

Nadeko is so shaken that it probably comes out in her words, too, but i have to ask.

After hearing that tone–which sounded like it was attacking Nadeko.

i can’t stay silent.

“Wh-Who–are you?”

But there’s no answer.

Instead–what i get instead of an answer is the white snake.

And not just one.

Tons of them come out from the tiny holes on both ends of the receiver like pasta oozing out of an extruder–

“Ah, aaaahhh!!”

i do scream.

It’s not about these being snakes as much as it’s the grotesque imagery–visuals sure to be cut from the anime.

Naturally, they too are a hallucination.

By the time Nadeko steps away from the pay phone–they’re gone.

“Come to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, my dear,” a voice beckons from the receiver, now free of any white snakes.

From that distance there’s no way i should be able to hear–the voice.

What’s going on?

Am i not just seeing things, but hearing them now?

What's wrong with Nadeko?

With Nadeko's head?

Ignoring her confusion, the voice continues, "I'll tell you there–who you've been trampling on as you go about your life."

"…"

"No one's a victim, okay? There are only victimizers in this world–how deluded every last one of you sons of bitches are."

007

i saw on the news the other day that there are people in the world who report everything they see to the police and constantly call ambulances to be rushed to the hospital.

They want to be “saved by others”–in other words, they want to be “someone others would save,” according to the commentator.

They want to be “someone people fuss over, worry about, and work to save.”

Because to be saved is to be loved, or possibly to be needed–so in terms of their psychological state, troubling people on purpose and seeking their forgiveness later is also a way to confirm that they’re loved and needed.

Apparently, this is all done unconsciously.

It’s by no means calculated.

Whether or not it is, someone like Nadeko understands very well–just how important being “fussed over” is to people who can’t find meaning in their own existence, who can’t find their own worth.

i’m in a situation now where i can seek Big Brother’s help.

And i’d be lying if i said it didn’t make Nadeko excited.

i’d be lying if i said i wasn’t thrilled, that Nadeko’s heart wasn’t pounding.

…Yes.

Just like that time.

“…”

So yes, Nadeko could be deluded–but i’m a girl, so i don’t think i’m a son of a bitch.

Is that too nitpicky?

i wasn't able to wait until evening.

i believe the right thing for Nadeko to do was to go straight home from school and sit there waiting for Koyomi to call.

i know that much.

It's not as if the situation changed somehow because i hallucinated a voice–there definitely hadn't been any "actual harm" at that point.

The hallucinations i see are just hallucinations.

The hallucinations i hear are just hallucinations.

But–i couldn't ignore the voice i heard.

"Victim."

One who receives harm.

Nadeko doesn't think she sees herself that way–and while it's true that she has a fairly strong persecution complex, she doesn't think of herself as a victim outright.

It's not as if you're automatically a victim just because you're harmed–not necessarily.

…So when i hear that completely inconsiderate, violent, rough voice–Nadeko has to act.

i can't help but be shaken.

And i can't help but be shaken into action.

Nadeko goes home and changes out of her uniform right away.

Overalls and a jacket.

i’ve borrowed the overalls from Mom, and the jacket from Dad. They’re baggy because Nadeko is petite, but that’s actually to her advantage since this is a disguise.

i’m thinking that i need to avoid being seen.

Finally, instead of the brimmed hat i always wear, Nadeko wears the red knit cap she bought for a ski trip and pulls it far down her face.

Over her eyes, you could say.

Nadeko wraps a travel fanny pack around her waist and stuffs it full of things, wears her outdoor loafers for a change, and leaves the house.

From there, i head to the mountain.

The home of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine–the mountain where Nadeko was reunited with Big Brother Koyomi.

Nadeko doesn’t have a bicycle, so she walks–it takes about thirty minutes. From here, it’s going to take another thirty to climb to the top of the mountain.

This is a tough journey for someone with no stamina like Nadeko.

i’m never going to start climbing mountains as a hobby.

Of course, i’m just walking straight up a path inlaid with steps (though they’re old)–so even if i have to take breaks, i’ll arrive there eventually with enough time.

To the summit. To that place.

…Yes, just as people can arrive at the truth simply by living their lives.

i will arrive, too.

That’s how i feel–and how i continue to feel when i manage to reach Kita-Shirahebi Shrine at the summit.

There was a “snake” coiled tightly around Nadeko’s body when she climbed this mountain again and again in June–so you could say this was an easier journey in comparison.

But when i reach the summit.

i’m–knocked out.

By no means does it feel like it’s been forever, but i totally lack the composure even to let it sink in that it’s been a while since Nadeko’s last visit.

“…”

No, maybe i’m not knocked out.

Rather, i’m stunned silent.

What i see–stuns Nadeko silent.

What Nadeko sees after passing through the shrine’s ragged, practically rotting gate–is *a countless number of snakes sewn onto* its grounds.

Jam-packed, maybe.

Not white snakes–but regular snakes that are regular colored. The bodies of these snakes have been *torn to pieces*–with a chisel, and been skewered to the ground, to the trees, to the shrine itself.

The snakes–are alive.

They’re alive and twitching, despite having been chopped up into pieces–their bodies as well as their heads, like some kind of live sashimi presentation.

Despite the unbelievable state they’re in, they haven’t died.

They say you have to crush a snake's head in order to kill it–but these are so full of vitality that what they say doesn't describe it.

Of course, i doubt the snakes will live long crucified like this–they'll die eventually.

It's a dreadful image.

Right, you can't turn this into an anime.

While i don't know whether or not animal protection associations go so far as to cover reptiles, just about anyone would be moved to say something if they saw this.

But–Nadeko says nothing.

Nadeko Sengoku stays silent.

When i'm in trouble–i fall silent.

"Still not surprised, huh? You don't even try to scream. Like you knew, like you knew all about it," the hallucination suddenly speaks out of nowhere–not through any kind of modern tool like a phone receiver this time. It feels like the words are being whispered right into Nadeko's ear.

Like something.

Like something disgusting is wrapping itself around Nadeko–like i'm being enwrapped.

That's not it, though.

What's most disgusting here on these grounds–is Nadeko.

Because.

"Yes. Because–this hellscape of a nightmare was your own doing, my dear Nadeko–"

"…"

i can't deny it.

But Nadeko automatically shakes her head.

“N-Nadeko…” i say to the voice–disgracefully. “Nadeko…didn’t go…this far.”

“Yes. This is just a hallucination–”

Just as the voice speaks, the sight before Nadeko transforms–all of the snakes, maybe even a thousand of them, along with the chisels skewering their bodies, disappear like a “murrage”–no, not everything disappeared.

A few are left.

i can’t tell exactly how many because they’ve been torn to pieces–but counting the number of heads i can see, i would say around twenty.

Twenty…

“So-o-o. Is this about the right number, Nadeko? The number that you slaughtered–”

The number of snakes that i–

Slaughtered.

Chopped up.

Crucified.

The voice keeps talking to Nadeko–like it’s cornering her.

“This–is around what you did?”

“…”

Nadeko bites her lip.

Nadeko quickly grabs her knit cap and pulls it down even further–it’s not just over her eyes, it hides them completely.

i don’t want to see it anymore.

But it’s no good.

It’s all burned into Nadeko’s eyes.

What i just saw–and the scene i saw in June.

The scene that Nadeko created in June–

“Yes, maybe you can always be a victim if you act that way, looking at the ground, staying silent, not speaking a word–*but how well is that going to go for you this time, I wonder*?”

Whose line was that?

Right–it was Miss Ogi…

Ogi Oshino–i feel like there was more she said, too…

Like there was something she said.

If i look at the ground, stay silent, and don’t say a word–

“S…Snake.”

“In fact, dear, you do have a choice.”

Nadeko has covered her eyes but can still hear the voice.

It’s rough, violent–i can hear the voice that doesn’t seem to care for Nadeko.

Oddly enough, that indifference feels like the biggest and only saving grace here.

Because.

“Your first choice is to go right back the way you came–you can forget everything. I can make you hallucinate, and I can talk to you like this, too–but that’s all. Just like you told your so-called Big Brother Koyomi, there’s no actual harm. Since there’s no harm, there’s no victim, either. Which is why it wouldn’t really be a problem if you just left.”

"…"

"No, seriously. It's fine if you pick that first option, okay? I don't mean to force you to do anything, Nadeko–I won't compel you, nor can I. It's not who I am. In fact, I even need to recommend that first choice to you."

"…"

"Don't just clam up."

The voice sounds annoyed by Nadeko's silence.

Even so, Nadeko can't say anything.

i feel like i hear a tongue click.

Umm.

A *snake's tongue*–given its structure, can it actually click–

"The second choice is for you to *atone.*"

"…"

"If you want to pick the first option, then go back through that gate the way you came and climb down those steps–you never have to return to this shrine again, and shouldn't. Turn your back on all of my brethren you killed and never look back–but listen."

It's strange. For some reason, i feel like the voice flashed a grin.

"If you want to atone for *this sin,* I'll give you the chance to do so–take that blindfold off and *look this way.*"

This way?

To confess.

Nadeko didn't take off her knit cap out of any admirable feelings of wanting to "atone"–i just reflexively, no, mechanically react to the words.

Nadeko isn't a good girl.

She only ever thinks about herself.

But–because she's only ever thought about herself, Nadeko's only choice here is to look.

Ahead of her. In front of her.

At the voice–at its form.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH–HHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

It's the loudest i've ever shouted before.

The loudest scream of Nadeko's life.

So big i fall over.

Not just on Nadeko's backside, i nearly do a backwards roll.

Something i could never do even in gym class, a backwards roll.

But *compared to the colossal white snake, coiled up and nearly covering the shrine grounds*–Nadeko's scream is like a drop in the ocean.

Its overwhelming presence hardly feels like a hallucination.

i don't feel scared or anything.

It's just, too big.

i just–yes. i think it's amazing.

In other words–Nadeko can only think like a child, which means she must be a child.

"So you looked this way. You saw the Serpent," says the snake too big even to be called giant–Mister Serpent. "Then, Nadeko, that makes you one of my brethren–we're partners. I'm going to make you pay, my dear."

008

It seems like Nadeko misunderstood Mister Serpent when he said there's no such thing as a victim–no, maybe i ought to say i just interpreted it in a way that was convenient.

i thought maybe he meant that every victim shares the responsibility for what happens to them in some way, or that harm comes to us by chance and anyone could be guilty if only the circumstances were a little different–you hear these kinds of things a lot, and i assumed it's what he meant.

i assumed so for Nadeko's own sake.

But i was wrong.

That isn't what he meant.

It was something more simple and plain and easy.

He meant exactly what he was saying.

Nadeko Sengoku–is guilty of a "massacur."

She's just another perpetrator.

There was no need to twist his words around.

It happened four months ago, in June–when those "charms" popularized by Mister Deishu Kaiki had their poisonous fangs in lots of middle schoolers.

Right in the middle of that.

A boy confessed his feelings for Nadeko.

When i say confess, i don't mean it in the repentant way, like what Nadeko is now attempting, but about liking and loving and stuff.

He was on the baseball team.

i don’t remember his name. i forgot it.

Actually, i feel like i never heard it from the start–i don’t think he ever told Nadeko his name.

Maybe he thought i had to know who he was–it’s hard to believe, but a lot of popular students on sports teams are like that.

Kids who don’t doubt that they’re famous.

But Nadeko didn’t have any interest in sports, and most of all, she didn’t like stuff about dating and lovers and all–so she turned him down.

i wasn’t going to date someone i didn’t know.

Because Nadeko–had someone she loved.

But this led to trouble–the fact that Nadeko “rejected” this popular boy led to jealousy.

i know how you feel! i wanted to sympathize.

Because i knew exactly how those girls felt when they wondered why he’d ever confess to someone like Nadeko–no, i think that boy must have been mistaken somehow. He probably had the wrong person.

But the “verasity” of this was only clear to Nadeko–what hurt was that her best friend wouldn’t understand.

She ended our friendship. It was sad.

To be completely honest, though, i wasn’t surprised. i was always thinking that a girl as good as her would end our friendship one day.

Is that honesty?

Maybe you’d say i’m just acting tough.

But please, let Nadeko act tough.

According to what Nadeko's other classmates said later (maybe it's better to call it a feeling that was revealed to everyone because of Mister Kaiki's "charms"), that friend became friends with Nadeko hoping to go out with the boy from the baseball club–so it seems there was something else going on that doesn't fully make sense to Nadeko, but it's all a mystery now.

The truth is shrouded in darkness–no, in rumor.

No one knows what the truth is anymore.

It's in the past.

The game of love.

Well, i feel like no one involved was skilled enough to describe it as that–anyway, it only gets more confusing the more we talk about it. Skipping ahead.

When this friend ended our relationship, she said something–"I put a curse on you."

In this case, the curse was one of the "charms" that Mister Deishu Kaiki was spreading around, and this girl had put a snake curse on Nadeko.

It seems like there were a lot of other variations, though.

Not just snakes, but bees, and frogs, and strangely enough, even shrimp–i wonder what a shrimp curse is.

Would it cause your spine to break?

In any case, Nadeko swallowed those malicious words hook, line, and sinker–even though their malice was only malicious.

The girl was hardly a villain, much less a demoness.

Nadeko went to the bookstore and looked for ways to undo the "charm"–in this case, normally the "right" thing to do would have been to go to Mister Kaiki, wherever he was in town, and pay him to

undo it. Unfortunately, Nadeko wasn't familiar with these rumors (Nadeko only learned about Mister Kaiki's existence during summer break. i didn't know yet that the charms were an artificial fad), and even if she did know, asking a stranger for help would have been too difficult for Nadeko.

That's why Nadeko did her best to teach herself how to undo her curse–it backfired, and the sham curse that wasn't supposed to activate ended up being invoked (which is why i asked Koyomi for help from the beginning this time, having learned from that), but well, let's put that aside for now.

The method of undoing the curse that Nadeko tried–was to split a wild snake into five equal pieces and follow certain steps to crucify it on the trunk of a tree.

Nadeko used a chisel.

To take a snake–and hack it to pieces.

And instead of a nail, i used the chisel to pin the snake's entire body to a tree.

i continued this massacur for about a week.

i was following the proper steps to undo a curse.

But the more i did it, the stronger the curse got and the more forcefully an invisible snake wrapped around Nadeko–if Koyomi hadn't found her, she'd probably be…

"You'd probably be what now–hmmmm? You would have massacred even more snakes, huh?"

"…"

Nadeko has no reply for the colossal white snake–for the Serpent's words.

That's right.

Nadeko wasn't a victim back then.

Because if Nadeko hadn't done anything–the curse would have been harmless, and even if that wasn't true.

As far as all the snakes Nadeko killed are concerned.

For the victims Nadeko sacrificed to save herself–

For those dozen-or-more lives.

All Nadeko is, is guilty.

"Well, be that as it may, mark me impressed–you killed all of those snakes as sacrifices, in vain too, but acted like none of it ever happened and played the part of a victim, going on and on about 'Big Brother Koyomi'–you've got some nerve."

"…"

"I'd be happy to remind you if you've really forgotten–exactly how you killed all of my brethren. The way you searched in the weeds for snakes, your valiant yet placid mug when you grabbed their heads, how it felt chopping them up with a chisel–"

"S…Stop it," Nadeko finally says.

She recalls how her hands shook.

She felt anything but "vallyant."

"i-i remember… i remember, so…"

"Oh. You do?"

"B-But…i had to."

"You had to? Uh huh, I bet the friend who cursed you would say the same thing–she just 'had to' curse you, she couldn't help it," the Serpent jeers.

i can't read his expression because he's a snake–and because of just how big he is, but malice is all i sense in his words.

Just plain–

Malice.

The kind you can find anywhere.

“‘But I had to!’–that’s what everyone says, tossing their morals aside. They’re all infantile, such hopelessly simplistic brats.”

“…Nadeko is…”

“People don’t know who they’re trampling on as they go about their lives–everyone thinks they’re just standing on the ground. But no, what’s under your feet isn’t the ground, it might be ants, it might be caterpillars, or it might just be snakes–”

“!!”

As soon as she hears the words, Nadeko moves her leg away.

Because all of a sudden–she’s standing on a white snake, no, actually, it’s a hallucination, i wasn’t standing on anything.

But it just happened to be a hallucination this time.

People are always. Nadeko is always.

Stepping all over something.

“No, no, no, no, my dear, I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. I’m not trying to criticize you–unlike me, the ‘living’ all need to claim other lives in order to live. Call it original sin, or maybe karma, or maybe nature–”

“…”

“Of course, hacking up all of those snakes means something completely different from getting your daily bread. Because the snakes you killed–that you not only killed but whose lives you left hanging, didn’t serve you any purpose at all. They died like dogs–it does sound strange to say a snake died like a dog, but it was worse

than dying in vain. Because they only put you in a worse spot by dying–hmmmm?”

“…”

“But then, what? You were able to meet Koyomi again because of it, so maybe they, my slaughtered brethren, did serve some purpose for you–”

“P-Please stop,” Nadeko says.

She has both hands over her ears–but that’s not going to block out a hallucination.

That’s right.

She could probably close her eyes–and still see it.

The colossal thing before Nadeko coiled around the shrine.

“What are you…trying to say? What do you know about Big Brother Koyomi? He’s, he’s, to Nadeko he’s a very–”

“Well, I actually know a decent bit about Big Brother Koyomi–but it doesn’t matter. The issue right now, my dear, is what you ended up doing–”

What Nadeko “ended up” doing.

What i did–how i failed. i’d forgotten it all.

The original sin that i never even recalled.

“Wh-What… S-So do i need to apologize? Do you want Nadeko to apologize? B-Bringing Nadeko here…e-even making her hallucinate, and cornering her like this… Wh-What do you mean, atone? Nadeko’s…”

i frantically join one word to the next.

Because it feels like Mister Serpent is never going to stop attacking Nadeko once she's done talking–and so Nadeko forces herself to speak.

"What does…Nadeko need to do?"

"What do you need to do?"

Heh, the Serpent laughs.

His fangs bared.

"Most people would normally beg for forgiveness–it's pretty impressive that you haven't even asked for it."

"…"

"So you feel like you failed, but not like you did anything wrong, is that it? Because you 'had to'? I suppose so, snakes are nothing more than lowly reptiles to humans."

"…N-Nadeko doesn't–"

"What?" the Serpent stops Nadeko from making excuses. "Maybe I shouldn't have used a roundabout word like 'atone'–it's been a while since the last time I spoke to a human, so it's hard to pick the right tone. Sorry, sorry–sorry about that, hmmmm?"

Now the Serpent is the one apologizing to Nadeko–though i don't feel anything resembling sincerity in his speech.

If anything, it feels like he's making fun of weak little Nadeko with everything he has–and if "making fun" is going too far, i guess it feels like he's playing with Nadeko.

"Well, I just have a request for you, Nadeko. If you're willing to feel the least bit bad about killing a dozen or so of my brethren–I just have a tiny little thing I wanted to request."

"Request…"

“Oh, or maybe it’d be better to put it this way, my dear?”

The Serpent.

The colossal white snake–opens its mouth wide, and even though he isn’t supposed to have any kind of expression on his face–he gives Nadeko an amused wink.

It’s not cute at all.

“Won’t you save me, Nadeko?”

“…”

It feels like he’s asking for the impossible.

But saying no feels even more impossible.

“S-Sure,” Nadeko says.

With her ears blocked. With her eyes covered.

Nadeko says: “J-Just a little, okay?”

Now that i think about it though, this tale’s conclusion must have been set in stone at that point–even if i knew what Mister Serpent was trying to make Nadeko do, even if i knew what he was going to do to her–even if i knew the truth and the whole truth, Nadeko would have nodded yes all the same. i don’t think her fate would have changed.

The tale only being a tale.

A future where Nadeko and Big Brother Koyomi fight to the death.

Keeps inching closer.

009

“Huh–so you don’t see it now? The white snake you were talking about?”

“Y-Yeah… It’s okay now. L-Looking back on it, the white snake that came out of the desk and the shoe cubby must have been a trick of the eye.”

“It tricked your eyes? Then it’s an aberration after all.”

“N-No. Just a trick of the eye.”

“Hmm… Well, fine then…”

“Y-Yeah. i’m doing fine. i’m doing great.”

Night.

Big Brother Koyomi called Nadeko at home right at ten–just like he promised.

He wasn’t even a second off.

Contrary to his reputation as someone who’s always late, Koyomi is surprisingly “punkchul.”

“S-Sorry. i must have worried you… i was probably just feeling down. I-It’s not good, is it–blaming everything on aberrations.”

“Well, true, but–hmm. Hold on a second, Shinobu’s right here…”

With that remark, he seems to move his phone away from his ear. Koyomi’s cell is sensitive enough that i just barely hear them.

“Hey, Sengoku’s saying she imagined it all–what do you think, Shinobu?”

“Imagining it all–at that point, ’tis already a manner of aberration. Hmph, yet this is the forelocked girl we speak of–so perhaps ’tis fine, to leave it be.”

“Really? The way I see it, we can never be too careful in her case given what happened last time. Don’t you think I ought to see her in person and hear her out, just to be sure?”

“Nay, I do not. At all. Not in the slightest. We ought not to dig deeper if the girl herself says she is fine. She told thee from the start the matter wasn’t serious, no?”

“Sure, but…”

They seem to be conferring.

i have to root for Miss Shinobu over Koyomi, as much as i hate to, on this issue.

Let’s go, you can do it.

“Okay, Sengoku,” he comes back to the phone after a bit. “If that’s the deal, then we’ll say it’s fine. They lived happily ever after. But if it turns out you were just imagining that it was your imagination, and this really is some kind of aberration, you need to let me know. Okay?”

“O-Okay, i will… Th-Th-Tha-Thank you, Koyomi,” Nadeko says before hanging up.

i’d normally want to talk for longer on a call from him, but even i realize this isn’t the time.

Just as i put down the phone and sigh–

“*Hsshh hsshh hsshh!*” i hear from Nadeko’s right hand.

Her right wrist, actually.

A white snake has enwrapped Nadeko’s right wrist like a bracelet–no, it feels more like a scrunchy against her skin.

Of course, it’s not really a bracelet or a scrunchy.

The white snake is–just that, a white snake.

It’s Mister Serpent.

He only looks puffy because his scales are bristling.

“Aww, you’ve gone and lied to your dear Big Brother–you sure about it? It’s almost like you’re trying to hide one crime by committing another. When you keep going down that path, you eventually find yourself past the point of no return–hmmmm?”

“P-Please don’t be so loud.”

Nadeko puts her hand over her wrist and sneaks up the stairs so that her mom and dad in the living room don’t notice.

Then i go into Nadeko’s room and lock the door.

i feel a little better, for the time being.

i can breathe a sigh of relief.

“There’s no need to sneak around–you’re the only one who can hear my voice, Nadeko.”

“…”

i know that.

Even then, i don’t want people to see Nadeko when she’s talking with Mister Serpent–they might not hear his words, but everyone’s going to notice Nadeko’s reactions to them.

And.

Anyone can see the Serpent–now that he’s the size of a scrunchy on Nadeko’s wrist.

“If you’re able to become this small, why make your first entrance so big you covered that whole shrine?”

“*Hsshh, hsshh, hsshh!*” Mister Serpent laughs at Nadeko’s simpleminded question before answering, “I was putting on a show,

that’s all–a show, for my grand entrance. What’s the point of an aberration if it doesn’t surprise humans?”

An aberration–that surprises people.

That’s something Koyomi said.

“…How big are you really?”

“Listen, I don’t have a size–because all I am is an idea.”

“An idea…”

Hearing this reminds Nadeko of something she learned in first-year math.

A line isn’t something that exists, it’s an idea.

It doesn’t have any length or width.

If you give it a length or a width, then it’s called a line segment, while a line is purely the straight line that connects two points–if you had to say how long, it’s infinite, and if you had to say how wide, the width is zero.

i don’t really get it.

What was that teacher trying to say?

Did he even know what he was saying?

When it comes to half-lines, i don’t even know what they are–but Nadeko thinks what she heard about lines then matches up to what the Serpent just said.

In short, it exists only in the mind, for the sake of explaining an explanation–

“Anyone is able to see me enwrapping your wrist, Nadeko, but that’s only because you think of me as being ‘visible to anyone’–or to go a little further, what’s happening is that I’ve possessed you, my dear.”

“Possessed…”

Possessed?

Isn’t that pretty bad?

Was Miss Kanbaru’s left arm possessed, or was that something else?

“Oh, don’t you worry–it’s just temporary. You only have to put up with it until the job’s done–*hsshh hsshh!*”

The Serpent seems to be in a good mood.

It kind of comes across as him being happy to have a physical form–but do aberrations get happy?

Oh, right, apparently Miss Shinobu jumps for joy when she’s given donuts.

i don’t know.

Nadeko sighs and sits down on the cushion in the middle of the room. It’s a little lazy of Nadeko, but i’m tired.

i’m not tired of lying to Koyomi–Nadeko isn’t particularly truthful and sometimes lies.

Just like everyone lies.

It’s not like i’m lying to him for the first time…but i’m not tired because i climbed a mountain, either.

i’m not physically tired at all, really.

The future is what’s making Nadeko tired.

When i think about what’s to come, Nadeko can’t begin to free herself from the “lassietude” she’s feeling…

“Ngh.”

But i can't stay like this forever–because if Nadeko doesn't move the story forward, she'll have to wear this tacky scrunchy forever.

"You dare call it 'tacky'–hmmmm?"

"…Can you read my mind? i…don't think i said that out loud."

"No, I just guessed from your expression–I mean, anyone could figure it out if you gave them that disgusted look. But sure, of course it is a little easier to make a guess since you and I are mentally connected now."

"…"

i was bothered by the thought that he could read Nadeko's mind, just like anyone would be, but i feel a little let down to know that he can't.

Just because Mister Serpent being a mindreader would make things easier for Nadeko since i wouldn't need to talk…

"I-In that case–Mister Serpent."

"Mister Serpent? Well–I would normally want to be called Master Serpent, but I guess it's too much to expect a young, helpless little girl's worship. Yes, my dear? What is it, Nadeko?"

"Wh-What does Nadeko need to do?"

Atonement.

Or the request.

Nadeko hasn't heard–the details of either.

At the shrine, as soon as Nadeko accepted, Mister Serpent quickly shrank his colossal body–and enwrapped her right wrist.

I'll give you the details tonight. I'm spent, he said immediately and went to sleep.

It seems like he used up a lot of his energy making Nadeko see and hear things–and not knowing what to do, Nadeko did nothing and just came back home.

Mister Serpent woke up a little bit after i got home, but before he could tell Nadeko anything, Big Brother Koyomi called her.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh…” i have trouble saying the words–but Nadeko gathers her courage. This is something i need to do. “Wh-What kind of dirty things…does Nadeko need to do?”

“Where’d that come from?!”

The aberration plays the straight man for me, his fangs bared. Nadeko lurches backwards on her cushion.

It’s way too scary to be a comedy routine.

“Why would you even think that, Nadeko? You’ve got quite a future ahead of you.”

“N-No? B-But psychologically speaking, snakes are considered sexual motifs, so–”

“Don’t you lump me in with dime-store clichés–ugh, maybe you’ve been a little too influenced by Koyomi or Kanbaru or whomever, hmmmm?”

“…”

i’m left speechless.

i couldn’t be any more embarrassed. i feel like blushing.

“Th-Then…Nadeko doesn’t need to take off her clothes? She doesn’t have to wear a school swimsuit or volleyball shorts?”

“Right. That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Oh…”

i let out a sigh of relief that Nadeko won’t become Nudeko.

Though i also think i can hear Miss Kanbaru's dejected wail.

"…? B-But why do you know about Miss Kanbaru?"

"Like I told you, I know. About her, about Koyomi–hmmmm?"

"S-So you really are reading Nadeko's m–"

"Like I also said, I'm not."

"M-Maybe you're reading Nadeko's manga?"

"Why is a middle schooler collecting a comics zine for grade school boys, anyway?"

Why not?

CoroCoro is pretty funny.

"Either way, no. It's just that *I was watching*–the ritual that all of you performed at the shrine that day."

"…So you–live at that shrine, Mister Serpent?"

Is that it?

Is that how he knows about Big Brother and Miss Kanbaru–and Nadeko's massacur there?

But in that case…

Hm? That means…

"Y-You're…'something' to that shrine?"

"Don't be saying that now like it's some great discovery, my dear. The shrine's name alone should have tipped you off."

"The shrine's name…" Kita-Shirahebi, so North Whitesnake Shrine… "What about it?"

"'What about it'… Having seen me, a literal white snake, you still don't have a clue? You really are dense, hmmmm?"

“…”

i can’t respond because he’s not wrong about Nadeko being dense.

What? But then, that…

So, is Mister Serpent a lot more important than Nadeko thinks?

“Mister Serpent, are you the person…the snake that shrine is dedicated to?”

“I’d like to say you’re right–but it’s been a long time since that shrine was dedicated to anything. All it is now is a *hangout where bad things gather*–no, it might be better to call it a dust heap than a hangout.”

“Now that you mention it, i think i heard someone say that before…”

It still functions as a place but is done for as an abode for the divine, or something–i’ve forgotten because it was too complicated. Or i guess it’s more accurate to say that i wasn’t listening from the start because it was too complicated.

“Th-Then–still, you’re important. E-Er, you’re still important, sir. Your Highness is most important.”

“It’s only going to be awkward if you start acting polite now–and I’m not important anymore. You can be casual around me. Let’s you and I be equal partners, Nadeko.”

“Partners…”

He used the same word when we first met.

A word to describe our relationship.

“I doubt calling ourselves ‘friends’ suits either of us,” he adds.

“…”

i agree with him there.

But even if he's telling Nadeko not to act polite, it's hard not to–i mean, if Mister Serpent lives at a shrine, that makes him (despite looking nothing like it now) a god.

Really, an actual god.

…Hm?

But i feel like Mister Oshino said at some point that all aberrations, conceptually, are *like* gods.

No, he argued that ultimately, whether it's a being or a concept, anything that isn't human is a god–that's Japanese polytheism in a nutshell.

They're everywhere.

That's what he taught Nadeko.

Still–just because they're everywhere doesn't mean that i don't need to be respectful to an obvious god… But then, Nadeko isn't able to converse in a way that doesn't seem rude no matter who she's talking to, so her trying to act polite or not is somewhat beside the point.

If i'm hearing it straight from the horse's (snake's) mouth, i guess i can be "casual" with him.

So Nadeko begins with an *Umm.*

"In that case, Mister Serpent…if it isn't anything dirty, what does Nadeko have to do? There's nothing else that i can do."

"I see you're a very curious teen, Nadeko…"

And don't be so hard on yourself, the Serpent chides.

As if to raise an eyebrow, he lifts his head from Nadeko's wrist (probably the limit of his reaction whether he's happy or sad) to stick out his tongue.

It does feel like he's stuck his tongue out at me.

"But I'm going to have you do something else–honestly, dear, you're the only one I can rely on. I'm going to be up-front and honest with you. I'm trying to prey on your weakness, to use my dirt on you, to exploit your guilt, in order to make a request–because that's how much I want you to do this."

"…"

"That's not much of a reaction–hmph, so you understood all of this from the outset? All right–you aren't as dense as you seem, are you?"

"N-Nadeko is…" i mumble, "dense. As a…brick."

"I wonder about that. Whatever–in that case, here's my request. *Hsshh, hsshh, hsshh,* a god begging a human for something, how times have changed."

"…"

"Listen, what I want you to do–is to *find something.*"

For once, the Serpent doesn't sound rough or violent. His words seem oddly direct.

Direct? No.

Maybe i should say–solemn.

"Nadeko, dear. I want you to find my corpse."

010

The next morning, Nadeko goes to school like always.

Yes, i might be hallucinating, i may be possessed by a god, but i still have to go to school–that's what being a middle school student means.

i wake up in the morning, change into Nadeko's school uniform, and start heading to school.

A true middle school life.

If there's anything at all out of the ordinary, it's the white scrunchy around Nadeko's right wrist–and i hate that i'll need to insist that it's there because of Nadeko's sense of fashion.

"H-Hey, Mister Serpent, i don't mind that you're sticking to Nadeko's wrist… i've already given up on it, but can you really not become invisible to other people?"

"It's not that I can't, I just don't want to be using any more of my power than this–right now, by borrowing your body, I'm getting to take it easy."

"You're getting to…"

"Don't worry, it's not like they can hear me–and I'll pretend like I'm just a plain old accessory while you're at school. I don't mean to infringe on your everyday life, you see."

"…"

i was trying to warn him that Nadeko's teachers might confiscate him, but along the way, i start to feel Nadeko isn't up to explaining it well, and that's where that exchange ends.

Nadeko getting scolded would be the end of it.

If they confiscate him, then i guess that's that.

Whatever happens, it can just happen.

And so, i arrive at school. Nadeko switches out her shoes at the cupboard–and of course no white snake comes crawling out of it today.

The hallucinations were a message sent to Nadeko by Mister Serpent–they were messengers, and there's no need for them now that we're communicating directly.

Apparently he "summoned up his last remaining strength" to send his message to Nadeko…

"Hey, hey, Nadeko–why are you changing into a different pair of shoes? Why do you need to do that?"

"…i dunno. i never thought about it, but, well, to keep the school clean. Um, please don't talk, okay?"

"Yeah, I get it–you don't need to keep on insisting. I've always been on the taciturn side. Just like you, Nadeko."

"…"

Nadeko can't bring herself to believe him. Will Mister Serpent really pretend to be a plain old accessory?

Nadeko's classmates don't greet her any differently when i walk into the classroom–and in the end Nadeko makes it to her seat like always.

"School, eh–well, similiar educational activities took place at that shrine once upon a time."

"…"

i guess you could say i was right.

Mister Serpent isn't going to stay silent even when there are people around.

While he does “pretend to be an accessory” as far as staying enwrapped around Nadeko’s right wrist and not fidgeting, i wouldn’t say that he’s keeping his promise.

“Look at the unnatural orderliness–it’s disgusting,” he says. “Or wait, is this something unique to this one class? It’s like you’re keeping each other in check, like there’s all this tension in the air–or how would I describe it–”

“…”

Nadeko gets out of her seat.

Then i leave the classroom. From there, i walk across the hallway, go up the stairs, and move all the way to the door to the roof we’re not allowed on.

“Hey, Mister Serpent?”

“What is it?”

“Be quiet,” i ask seriously. It’s the first time i’ve ever been this blunt to a person.

Though he’s a snake, not a person. And also a god.

i doubt i’ve ever asked for something this seriously though, not on Nadeko’s first shrine visit of the year, not even on New Year’s Day.

“*Hsshh, hsshh*–sorry about that. I guess I lied when I said I was taciturn.”

“You shouldn’t flip-flop so fast…”

Not that i ever believed him.

But it’s not like i can ignore how brayzen he’s being just because i didn’t believe him… In fact, i even feel “indignent” at the way he’s admitting it.

“Listen, Mister Serpent.”

“What is it?”

“i think you know this, but Nadeko is a well-behaved girl.”

“Well-behaved?”

“A well-behaved, reserved, and calm girl.”

“Sounds like someone you never notice.”

“Right. A girl you never notice, that’s Nadeko,” i whisper to Nadeko’s wrist.

…The problem is how it must look–we’re only okay now because we’re in an empty stairwell.

The picture is a big problem.

“When a girl you never notice is seen talking to her wrist by her classmates, guess what they’d think?”

“What?”

“That she’s a ‘pitiful girl.’”

Upgraded from well-behaved to pitiful–no, Nadeko should be honest with herself and just call it a downgrade.

With the state Nadeko’s class is in, it would be a disaster.

“Really? I feel like not much would change–what’s your position shifting around a bit going to do?”

“…”

How am i supposed to answer that? Nadeko’s position…

“It’s not like you talk to anyone to begin with, so why does it matter what they think–people can think anything they want about you, it’s all the same if you never speak to them. Am I wrong?”

“…”

Hm? Wait, is that true?

i'm almost convinced, but i also feel like i'm being tricked… i don't think a god would ever dupe a person, but if anyone can play with human emotions however they want, it's going to be a god.

He does lie, after all.

And–he preys on Nadeko's weakness.

"A-Anyway, Mister Serpent."

"Hm? C'mon, Nadeko. Have you gotten through your entire life switching topics with words like 'anyway' and 'that aside'? Without ever having a proper conversation? I haven't even managed to convince you but you don't bother arguing back. Is that how you get by in this world, Nadeko? By setting things aside without even considering them?"

"…Anyway."

How Nadeko gets by in this world.

She does it by–looking down and falling silent.

By waiting–until they go away.

"You promised Nadeko she could do what she wanted during the day…remember? That she could live her life like normal during the day… That i only had to look for your 'corpse' at night…"

"I wouldn't call it a promise, but yeah–now that you mention it."

"…"

"No, sure, it was a promise–yeah. Okay, I know, you're right. If you're gonna spend your nights on me, dear, I don't plan on getting in your way apart from that. I may be enwrapping your wrist, Nadeko, but it's not like I'm a pair of handcuffs."

"…"

Last night.

Mister Serpent and i made the following promise.

No, maybe you wouldn't call it a promise, after all–and it's not a deal, either, because Nadeko is just doing whatever Mister Serpent tells her to do.

Nadeko, dear. I want you to find my corpse–i trembled when he said that.

i cowered at that "gastly" word, *corpse.*

A corpse hunt?

"Wh-What do you mean? Y-Your…corpse…"

"Come on, Nadeko, don't make it sound like something filthy–you look like an elementary schooler who's just been told she has to clean the bathroom as punishment."

"Wh-Why such a specific example?"

It's not very god-like of him.

Hsshh, hsshh, hsshh, the Serpent laughed.

"Well–since I've merged with you, even if I can't read your mind or access your memories, I'm able to pull out a good bit of your knowledge."

"Are minds and memories and knowledge all different?"

i didn't really get it.

Was it like the relationship between Koyomi and Miss Shinobu, or maybe between Miss White Hanekawa and Miss Black Hanekawa? No, the one between Nadeko and Mister Serpent doesn't seem nearly as equal as those two combinations.

“Of course, a child not wanting to have to clean a bathroom is nothing new–but Nadeko, I’m not asking you to clean anything. I just want you to pick up some trash.”

“Some trash?”

“I wouldn’t call it a treasure hunt–even I wouldn’t call my own corpse treasure. But humans used to treat that corpse as a god.”

“…?”

“An object of worship, in other words. My corpse that was once deified at the shrine…though it’s been lost now.”

Lost–but more must have been lost than that object of worship.

Everything there, at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, has been lost–its object of worship, faith–the power, everything.

Right now.

It’s just a place.

No, maybe i should even say–it *used to be* just a place, used to be just a hangout.

“That’s right. The fact that I can be this way–is a miracle. Well, it was that vampire–Shinobu Oshino, the former Kissshot. Maybe I should say it’s all thanks to Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.”

“…”

When Miss Shinobu, king of aberrations, came to this town, a lot of things followed her, not just frauds like Mister Deishu Kaiki.

A lot of–*bad things.*

They were especially drawn to those ruins of a hangout–the air pocket that was the shrine.

It was those “bad things” along with her “method of undoing” it that activated the originally ineffective “charm” on Nadeko–

And.

What should have been a fallen god–Mister Serpent.

It also resurrected him.

“So this is because of Miss Shinobu again…” Nadeko said, drooping her shoulders.

i couldn’t tell Big Brother.

From that point of view, at least, Nadeko was right to refuse his help.

“Simply by being strong, she has an effect, both positive and negative, on her surroundings. She can’t be held responsible for that–and anyway, my dear, you’re making it sound like this is all someone else’s responsibility, but your massacre is one of the reasons all of this is happening.”

“…”

There was nothing i could say to that.

Not that i ever have anything to say.

“But even my moving, miraculous resurrection is only temporary–it’s a temporary miracle. Something like an illusion. I’m going to disappear soon.”

Again, the Serpent said.

“Right now I’m like a ghost.”

“…Th-The ghost of a god?”

Or of an aberration? It was hard to keep straight.

Something like a hallucination?

“The details–I’ll omit, but *someone used up* just about all the ‘bad things’ hanging around that hangout. Those ‘bad things’ are the energy powering my current form, but *that very* spiritual energy got

used for something pretty trivial. All I could do was watch in silence from inside the shrine," the Serpent said.

i heard an unusual note in his voice that you might call a sense of "angwish."

i didn't really get it, but what sort of terrible person uses up Mister Serpent's energy source without even asking first?

"Wh-Who would…do that?"

"Well, you know, it was Shinobu."

It was Shinobu. Miss Shinobu.

She was the cause and the effect.

It's kind of like setting a fire so you can take credit for putting it out.

"Those 'bad things' gathered in the hangout due to that vampire's strength, so she could do whatever she wanted with them–at the same time, it nearly caused the concept that is me to vanish."

"And…you need your corpse, so that you don't vanish?"

A new source of energy.

To survive, to go on living–well, i shouldn't say "living" in this case.

Just–to "continue being."

To thrive.

"Yes, that's it. In other words, my version of 'food'–I guess you need to eat to keep yourself going whether you're a god or a human."

"Food…"

“Eating, in order to live. Although in my case, I don’t kill in order to live.”

“…”

“Hmm? Seems like there’s something you want to say–‘Nadeko *had to* kill those snakes *in order to live,* so how can she be blamed for that,’ maybe?”

“N-No, that’s not it… And anyway, Nadeko failed… Just–”

“Just what?”

“Nothing.”

“Tsk.” Mister Serpent sounded irritated that Nadeko took back her words–and you probably would be, too, confronted with someone who never committed and always ran away. “If there’s something you want to say, come out and say it–how else can we build a relationship of trust?”

“A relationship of trust…”

“Or do you not want to build one? You’ll have to speak up, though–unlike all the humans you’ve dealt with until now, Nadeko, I’m not going anywhere. I’m just going to stay here wrapped around your right arm, and you can’t get away from me.”

“That’s…because you’re using Nadeko as your energy source now–right? Like a backup battery…”

“It’s just an ad-hoc measure. I really am going to up and vanish as things stand–which is why I need you to find my corpse, no matter what it takes.”

“And you…can’t find it yourself, i guess?” He wouldn’t be asking Nadeko for help otherwise.

“Yeah–I can’t leave that shrine, generally speaking.”

“Huh…”

When i think about it later.

The line was a slip-up on Mister Serpent's part–but Nadeko accepted that he "can't leave the shrine" without giving it any real consideration…

i should have given it thought.

The reason why he "can't leave the shrine."

"That's why I need you to help me, dear. To find my corpse."

"C-Could you please stop repeating that word…Mister Serpent? I-It's scary, and kind of dreadful…"

"Like I said, don't be calling a corpse scary or dreadful or dirty. And I mean that for all corpses, not just mine."

"i-i never said dirty…"

It was Mister Serpent who compared it to cleaning a bathroom.

And, even though it's not like Nadeko is ever happy to do it, she never skips out on cleaning duty, whatever the assignment.

Nadeko doesn't want anyone getting mad at her, you see.

"i wouldn't have as much trouble talking about it…if you called it an object of worship."

"It's embarrassing to call my own corpse an object of worship–I don't want you to exalt it, I want you to exhume it. Hah, both of those words begin with 'ex' but what a big difference in impression… In any case, that's what I want to ask you to do, Nadeko."

"…"

Find his corpse so he can continue being.

A corpse hunt, so he can thrive.

For all of that trouble to summon Nadeko–you could say it was a very simple request.

But.

It must have been a very pressing issue for Mister Serpent–there's an expression in Japanese, *thousand at sea, thousand on mount,* which means experienced.

A snake that lives for a thousand years in the oceans and a thousand years in the mountains becomes a dragon… Judging from various things he said, Mister Serpent was probably just a regular snake once upon a time.

After that snake died, it was deified as that shrine's object of worship–and when the shrine lost its faithful, Mister Serpent died a second time.

As for a third time.

i guess he was saying–no thanks.

"Hey, Mister Serpent."

"What?"

"Why did you pick Nadeko as your partner?"

That was something i needed to ask him.

Nadeko understood that her only choice was to help the Serpent–which is exactly why i needed to hear the reason.

"It's not like I picked you, really."

But the Serpent's reply was dismissive.

It was more than cool–well…

It was as coldblooded as a snake.

Not that i'm sure snakes are coldblooded that way.

"You were the only one I could rely on, that's all."

"…"

If you just took his words, it sounded like there might be a strong bond between us, but that wasn't how he said it–he was just so blunt and straightforward.

"My dear, you're the only channel I had, hmmmm?"

"Channel…"

"I tried to use a current term for your sake, Nadeko, but personally, I would describe it as a karmic tie. Without faith, that shrine wasn't connected to anyone–aside from you, Nadeko, who busily applied yourself to killing snakes on its premises, of all things."

"So you didn't decide on Nadeko, there was no one besides Nadeko… But then Big Brother Koyomi and Miss Shinobu–"

"Yes, they did have their share of fun at the shrine–but that's a bit too weak as far as karmic ties go. The channel's signal isn't strong enough. After all, Nadeko, you killed my brethren–you slaughtered my thralls, and that's enough to make our tie strong. It still took nearly two full months to get the tuning right. It was like taking that thin little link and reeling it in like it was a wet noodle."

"…"

So that's what it was.

In the end–it was punishment, for a crime.

i wasn't chosen by any means.

i would be atoning.

No matter what the Serpent says–no matter how he softens it for Nadeko, all this is the aftermath of what i did then.

The wet noodle analogy was weird, though.

Maybe he went with something thin and long because he's a snake?

“…Meals,” i blurted out.

“Hmm?”

“Meals. People eat.”

“Oh–yeah, I ate too when I was ‘living’–and like I said, I still need energy in order to ‘continue being,’ and that’s what I’m trying to get from you.”

“Y-You said what Nadeko did is different from having your daily bread…but couldn’t it be the same?”

“What’s that? Are you trying to make excuses?”

“N-No, that’s not it…”

It was hard to explain. Nadeko can’t put her feelings into words.

But this–was the same thing i started to say to Mister Serpent earlier, before stopping.

i should have tried at least, for the sake of our partnership.

Even if it came out sounding clumsy.

“What Nadeko wants to say…is that there must be consequences to eating a meal…if you’re going to say that crimes are always met with punishment.”

“…”

“i thought that was the food chain… Anything that eats is eaten by something else. But…once you’re at the top, i guess you don’t get eaten anymore.” Nadeko was thinking as she spoke. “Humans–aren’t eaten by anything. We only eat, only kill… There’s no punishment for our crime.”

“…”

“When people say ‘thank you for this meal’ before they eat, i wonder how much they’re feeling that they’re treating themselves to other lives.”

“The food chain is more complicated than that, you know. It just gets drawn as a pyramid because it’s easier to understand that way, but really, it should be drawn as a circle. Like an Ouroboros–even humans end up as food for microbes once they’re corpses.”

“…”

The “correct answer” made Nadeko go quiet–but no, that’s not what i wanted to say.

It wasn’t getting across. Not Nadeko’s words, nor their sense.

“What’s the matter, dear?”

“Nothing… Okay. Anyway.”

Oops, i said it. *Anyway.*

“Anyway, i just need to find your object of worship, right? And–once i do find it, you’ll free Nadeko.”

“Free you… I don’t mean to be forcing you to do anything, Nadeko. I’m just preying on your guilty conscience, that’s all.”

“…”

That felt kind of forceful to me, but it was true. Mister Serpent wasn’t forcing Nadeko to go look for anything.

i’d been granted options.

Mister Serpent didn’t make Nadeko hallucinate white snakes (probably through this “channel” of his) because he wanted to threaten her everyday life. He wanted to send Nadeko a message, simply to summon Nadeko–

“A-Anyway…” i said again, “fine. Nadeko will look for your object of worship and find it.”

“That would save me. Though I’m not going to thank you.”

“…”

Why not?

Was it because he’s a god?

“So then, Mister Serpent. Where is your corpse?”

“Dunno.”

“Is it somewhere on that mountain?”

“Dunno.”

“Is it in this town?”

“Dunno.”

“When did it disappear?”

“Dunno.”

“About how big is it?”

“Dunno.”

“Is it big like the first time i saw you?”

“Dunno.”

“So is it small like you are now?”

“Dunno.”

“About how heavy is it?”

“Dunno.”

“Is it all bony? Or is it like a mummy?”

“Dunno.”

“About how old is it?”

“Dunno.”

“Okay!” Nadeko slapped her knee and said with a big smile. “With all of that to go by, i’ve practically found it alrea–hold on a gosh dern second!!”

Nadeko found herself playing the straight man.

Going along with it for a while and then interrupting herself, at that. Even Big Brother Koyomi doesn’t do that one much.

The fake accent was downright cringeworthy, too.

“H-How am i supposed to find it… So basically, you don’t know anything.”

“I suppose you could put it that way.”

It was the only way i could put it.

Language isn’t that expressive.

In fact, it might be easier to find a needle in a haystack–because at least in that case, you know there’s a needle somewhere in the haystack.

Not that i don’t have a hard time understanding why you would ever need to find a needle in a haystack…

“There’s no way…no way i could do that, even if Nadeko spent her whole life trying. Even if i kept on trying after being reborn as a princess.”

“Why are you assuming that you’d be reborn as a princess? Well, no, don’t worry. That’s why I’ve merged with you, Nadeko–as far as channels go, there are none I have a stronger connection to than my own corpse–that object of worship. You should be able to find it in no time at all if the two of us are one.”

“No time at all…”

“If you give it your best.”

“i don’t want to give it Nadeko’s best…”

“Could you please for once?”

“…”

So the scrunchy enwrapping Nadeko’s wrist was going to act as a dowsing rod? Then it really might be easier than finding a needle in a haystack.

But still.

“…Is there a possibility it doesn’t exist anymore?” i asked. “Because it’s been destroyed or burnt?”

“There is…and in that case, we’ll just have to give up.”

Mister Serpent said this like he was being gallant.

If he really was, though, maybe he should have forgotten about getting Nadeko’s help to begin with.

i’d have given up, if i were Mister Serpent, upon realizing that Nadeko was the only person who could help.

“…How much time do we have? By when does Nadeko need to…find Mister Serpent’s object of worship?”

“Not a clue–I’m like a candle in the wind, ready to go out at any moment. I’m relying on your energy now to continue being in this world–but again, you’re like a backup battery. Our standards don’t line up, unfortunately…”

“Standards?”

“It’s like keeping something plugged in for too long to a foreign power outlet–don’t worry, I don’t plan on taking over your body or anything, and I’m not going to stay merged with you until you die. If

you don't want to do this, dear, you can just wait it out and I'll eventually disappear."

"…"

"You've got two choices. Give it your best or bear it."

"…"

It seemed like he was set on giving Nadeko a choice–but from Nadeko's perspective, i didn't have any.

At least, that's what i thought.

i didn't want to have to keep wearing the tacky scrunchy, and anyway, giving it her best and bearing it are the same to Nadeko.

"i'll help you look… But Mister Serpent," Nadeko said. "i can still go to school, right?"

"Hmmmm?"

"E-Er…i mean, can i still lead a normal life? N-Nadeko…d-doesn't want people to be suspicious of her."

"People? Who do you mean?"

"…Big Brother Koyomi," Nadeko gave a straight answer to the Serpent's question. "Because i told him it was nothing…that it was just Nadeko's imagination."

"…? In that case, dear, shouldn't you be saying that you don't want him to worry, rather than be suspicious of you? Isn't that why you lied to him?"

"W-Well…"

i messed up. i slipped up.

"I thought," the Serpent pressed, "you lied to him despite wanting him to save you because you didn't want him to worry–was I wrong?"

“N-No, you’re not… Yes, that’s it. i don’t want him to worry. To worry…”

Mister Serpent gave a questioning look at the way Nadeko sounded like she was taking it back, but maybe he decided it wasn’t important. “Whatever,” he dismissed. “That’s what we’ll do, then–you’re right, I can’t ask you to spend all your time, day or night, for my sake. That’d be too brazen. And anyway, if you’re going to be searching for my corpse, that’s to say, object of worship, it’s better if you’re doing it at night.”

“…”

“Okay, so it’s decided. Days are yours, and nights are mine. As a show of gratitude for your self-sacrifice, I vow not to infringe on your private time–”

…

That was what happened last night.

It might be a little confusing because of how long it was, but all of that was a flashback. Now, i’m arguing with the Serpent on the landing of the stairs leading up to the school’s off-limits roof. Wait, no–now.

i’m in the middle of fighting Koyomi to the death now.

All of this is what’s flashing before Nadeko’s eyes, a kalaidoscope of revolving memories.

Regrets flying through her mind.

This whole time i’ve been thinking how Nadeko Sengoku could have gotten off what seems like her single-tracked fate–so.

Let’s get back to this turning kalaidoscope.

Spin spin spin spin.

“–Liar. And you’re a god, too.”

“Hold on… Sure, it was a lie when I said I’m taciturn, and I did vow not to infringe on your private time, but I never claimed that I wouldn’t talk. The mortal world is a novel thing to a god–well, actually, scratch that. It’s the same as it ever was.”

“…”

“They say that the heavens don’t talk, they make men talk instead–but I’m a talkative god. I don’t mean to make any trouble for you, though. I don’t mean to turn you into a ‘pitiful girl’…there’s no point in doing that. All right, all right, so I just need to stay quiet.”

“…”

“Fine, I won’t just stay quiet, I’ll get some shut-eye. Happy?”

I’m not the type to talk in my sleep, either, the Serpent promises.

“This is hibernating season, anyway…”

“Yeah. But please don’t actually hibernate. Be sure to wake up at night, because Nadeko can’t do anything on her own–”

And.

Just as Nadeko is making herself clear to Mister Serpent.

“Hey, Nadeko? What’re you doing over there?”

i hear a voice coming from behind.

To be precise, it’s coming from down the stairs–from Nadeko’s teacher, Mister Sasayabu, who is looking up toward her.

Mister Sasayabu’s nickname is Panda-sensei. Not because he looks like a panda (in fact, he’s skinny) but only because of his name, which means “bamboo grass”–though Year 2, Class 2 is no longer the kind of place that calls its homeroom teacher by a nickname.

“i, i–”

Nadeko replies as she turns around, a little concerned about the hem of her skirt given the angle between us on the stairs.

“i’m nothing.”

A slip of the tongue.

i mix together “i’m fine” with “It’s nothing” and end up sounding like a girl who’s up for anything.

“?”

Mister Sasayabu tilts his head.

Of course he does.

“i’m fine,” Nadeko simply restates. She lacks the wit to turn a misstep into a joke and land on her feet…and just feels embarrassed.

It will be enough to make Nadeko feel depressed for about three days.

“i-i just tried to go up to the roof for a breath of fresh air, but then, it, the door, was locked…and Nadeko found herself at an im, im, im–”

i try to say “impass,” but the word seems so hollow in its formality that i stutter.

“…”

From there, Nadeko falls silent.

i don’t like lying.

No, it’s not that i don’t like it, i’m just bad at it…

Even now, having lied reflexively, i can’t stop looking at the floor.

“C’mon, Sengoku. You ought to know that the roof is off-limits. Haven’t I always told you guys?”

“…”

Nadeko can’t reply to Mister Sasayabu’s completely accurate statement.

i go quiet when things get difficult.

That’s who Nadeko is, glad to make your acquaintance.

It’s true that Nadeko knew that the roof was off-limits, and it’s because people don’t come this way that i chose it for a “confedential” talk with Mister Serpent…

Mister Sasayabu probably passed by after supervising a club’s morning practice–i believe he’s the advisor for the wind instruments club, which meets in the music room.

“…i’m sorry.”

In the end, Nadeko apologizes out loud because it’s just as hard staying quiet in front of her homeroom teacher.

Between the Silence and Apology commands, i picked Apology.

Nadeko doesn’t need to lower her head.

She is looking at the floor, so it’s like her head is already bowing–though maybe it doesn’t look that way because Nadeko is on these stairs, as i said earlier, and higher up than Mister Sasayabu.

“It’s almost first bell,” he tells me.

He seems to have put Nadeko’s suspicious behavior aside–he’s looking at her the way adults often do, in other words, maybe not at a “pitiful girl” but at a “vexing girl.”

If you were to put it into words, it says, “There seems to be some kind of problem here, but dealing with it would be tiresome.”

i wish they knew how much it hurts when they look at a child that way…but i don’t have the courage to say so.

Plus it’s tiresome for Nadeko, too.

“Okay,” she just replies, “i’ll be right there. We have a quiz today.”

“Yes… Can you help me hand out the–hm?” Mister Sasayabu interrupts himself. Finding this odd, i read his expression, and it’s saying, “What’s that?”

Oh, i think–in apologizing, Nadeko instinctively put both her hands on her thighs. In other words, she exposed her wrists to Mister Sasayabu.

In other words, Mister Serpent on her right wrist.

Nadeko gulps.

The Serpent is quiet–he doesn’t talk, and he stays enwrapped around Nadeko’s right wrist, not moving an inch.

In that state, he really seems like just a tacky scrunchy–not that he could do anything about the tackiness if he tried.

Anyway, the Serpent doesn’t say anything.

He pretends to be an accessory like he promised.

i’m glad, but in this case, just because he’s pretending to be an accessory doesn’t mean–

“Well, fine… I’ll let it pass,” i hear Mister Sasayabu mumble.

Like he’s talking to himself and doesn’t mean for Nadeko to hear.

i guess he doesn’t find Mister Serpent suspicious and was just noting Nadeko’s violation of the school rules.

Immoderate accessories are subject to confiscation…

It seems like Mister Sasayabu decided to overlook it, though.

i’m not grateful.

Because it’s just another case of feeling that “dealing with this girl is tiresome.”

It’s just what i was expecting, too.

…It’s true that Nadeko herself finds being treated in such a way nice and “hassel-free.” It’s relaxing for a student when a homeroom teacher doesn’t want to get too involved with you.

i breathe out a sigh of relief and wonder if i should wear a blouse with longer sleeves tomorrow, but…

“By the way, Sengoku. What your teacher asked you to do the other day–how’s it going?” Mister Sasayabu says, making Nadeko breathe her sigh back in with an *ack.*

Not like that’s a real figure of speech.

“H-How’s it going?”

“Any closer to getting it worked out?”

“Um.”

Mister Sasayabu’s words send Nadeko into a light–no, a heavy panic. Nadeko can feel her fingertips shaking.

It’s not like i’ve just sprinted or anything, but Nadeko’s knees are trembling, too.

The panic isn’t because i don’t understand what Mister Sasayabu is saying–in fact, it’s because i know what he’s talking about and it’s a topic that i want to avoid that i’m panicking so much.

“Hey hey, I’m counting on you,” he responds to Nadeko’s not-a-response of a reaction, clearly disappointed. “You realize that this needs to get taken care of fast, right?”

“…”

“You’re the only one I can count on–Class President Sengoku.”

With that, he raises a hand and leaves.

Well, like always, i guess.

While i stand around mumbling, the other person leaves.

Even Nadeko's homeroom teacher.

You could call it Nadeko's killer anti-personnel tactic.

In her whole life, the other person never failed to walk away, right, except for like once–

"You're the class president?" the Serpent asks as soon as Mister Sasayabu is gone.

He doesn't sound cynical, just plain surprised–and Nadeko is very proud that she surprised an aberration when their business is surprising people.

That's a lie, i don't think that.

i feel like i've been found out.

i wanted to keep it a secret because he might make fun of Nadeko…

"Yeah. Nadeko is the class president."

"Liar. Class president? Like the class representative? The most respected student, who's responsible for managing class affairs–is you? Hmmmm, Nadeko?"

Mister Serpent sounds completely unconvinced–he's being incredibly rude from an objective point of view, but i kind of understand. "Not really… The class president isn't respected…"

Of course, the Serpent draws his knowledge from Nadeko, so for him to be asking her questions or for her to be issuing denials is "fewtle"…but i guess knowing and feeling are different, and so is accepting or rejecting what you know.

Also, considering i wasn't found out until now, Nadeko's class presidency must be categorized under memories rather than knowledge.

“It would be one thing if i was chosen like a class president among class presidents like Miss Hanekawa…but Nadeko is different.”

“Different? How so?”

“i just got the short straw,” Nadeko says. It comes out sounding a bit “masachistic,” but i can’t help it here. “You noticed our class’s strange mood, Mister Serpent, didn’t you? That started during first term this year and kept going through summer break…so when we had to choose the second-term class president, there weren’t any volunteers or nominees…and after a dispute–”

No.

It’s more accurate to say that there was never any dispute.

There was just that oppressive air in the room.

“–Nadeko was chosen.”

“And how exactly does that end up happening?”

Even after Nadeko tried to explain, Mister Serpent doesn’t seem convinced–but i guess i can understand.

It’s just so hard to explain that heavy, gloomy air–it would exist between the lines in a novel, so how are you supposed to put it into words?

i’m bad at language arts, anyway.

i’m even worse at explanations.

“But…well, if i have to…then it’s because Nadeko was the only girl in class who didn’t go for those ‘charms’…i guess.”

“Huh. So process of elimination.”

I should have guessed as much, Mister Serpent mutters.

He seems to get it when he describes it as a process of elimination–though it absolutely makes Nadeko feel sad that this is how he's finally convinced.

But Nadeko knows better than anyone else that she's not the type to be class president and has felt it keenly over the last two months, so i can't argue with him.

i almost want to get on his wavelength.

If we were holding glasses, i would have toasted to it.

"In short, a job no one wanted to do or make anyone do got pushed onto you–what a bunch of assholes, hmmmm?"

"Not really… It's not like it was pushed onto Nadeko…"

i wouldn't go so far, but it's also true that i couldn't turn the position over to someone.

You could say Nadeko got pushed over.

"Well, at least they didn't foist an outrageous role on a timid girl who isn't equipped for it, because that would be abuse–*hsshh, hsshh, hsshh.*"

"…If we're going to talk about forcing a task on Nadeko, doesn't the same go for you, Mister Serpent?"

"Oh? Well, maybe–guess I'm an asshole too."

He openly admits it with a "gaffaw."

Like he's saying, *you got me there.*

Really, how shameless.

"Maybe it's just the way of the world. Quiet girls like you end up with the short straw. Always."

"…"

“That being said, what was your teacher talking about just now? What’s this thing he asked you to do?”

“It’s–”

Mister Serpent asks a reasonable question i knew he was going to ask, and Nadeko recites her prepared line, exactly as scripted.

“It’s…none of your business, is it?”

“It’s not? I thought you and I were partners, one in body and spirit.”

“D…Don’t think that…”

Nadeko’s tone is feeble.

“Repewdiating” someone is hard.

And Mister Serpent keeps piling it on.

“I mean, it might be my business–I’ve requested something of you. It would suck if someone butted in and got in my way.”

“If this is about who asked first, he did,” Nadeko points out reluctantly.

i want to be smart about keeping everything vague, but it’s difficult for a girl like Nadeko to convey something in a hazy way and shut down any follow-up questions–so her only option is to say it outright from the start.

“He told me to ‘Do something about the class’s mood.’ A while ago.”

“Hunh?”

Mister Serpent opens his mouth like he’s dumbstruck.

i almost hear a sound effect–*guh.*

“Hold on, seriously? If anything, isn’t that the homeroom teacher’s job, not the class president’s?”

“Yeah, well, you’re right about that…”

An aberration being completely in the right is unsettling.

But while i say aberration, Mister Serpent is a god. Of course he’s going to be in the right sometimes.

“i guess…he’s farming his job out.”

“*Hsshh, hsshh*–sounds even worse than me! Just from one glance it’s clear that no kid can fix that situation from the inside all on her own, hmmmm?”

“It’s fine, though,” Nadeko says.

i don’t know if Mister Serpent is sympathizing with Nadeko or just amused (i can’t read his expression), but either way, i want to get off this subject.

Because, for Nadeko–it’s already *over.*

It’s run its course.

It’s like arguing back and forth about what happens in a manga that’s reached its final chapter.

Nothing will come of it.

“What do you mean, it’s fine–it’s not fine.”

“Mister Sasayabu’s request isn’t going to ‘styemie’ your request…so it’s fine.”

“Hey, it’s not like I could care less about the rest of your life so long as my wish is granted–you know what? If you want, I’d be happy to hear you out.”

“Hear Nadeko out…”

A god hearing Nadeko out. It has a strange ring to it.

So something like confessing at a church? No, Nadeko isn’t seeking to be comforted. Mister Serpent is on the wrong track.

“It’s not like that… It’s fine because, actually, Nadeko’s not bothered by it…”

“Not bothered? After being burdened with this stuff? By your classmates and your homeroom teacher?”

“i’m not bothered. After all,” Nadeko says, “it’s not like Nadeko is doing anything.”

“You aren’t?”

“Not her job as class president, nor the task Mister Sasayabu assigned to her.”

i’m not doing anything, i repeat.

Then Nadeko begins to climb down the stairs.

The first bell is about to ring, like Mister Sasayabu said–he’s wrong about a lot of things, but he’s right about the time.

So i head to class.

“……,” Mister Serpent goes quiet.

Has he read the mood?

He doesn’t say a word after that, not until school ends.

011

That night.

Just like Nadeko promised Mister Serpent, she goes to find his corpse–and slips out from her home.

i decide to keep it a secret that i'm feeling excited over acting a little like a bad girl.

"*Hsshh, hsshh*–I'm relieved," the Serpent comments as soon as i'm outside, the first thing i've heard from him in a while.

Could he really have been sleeping, like he said? To–what was it, conserve his energy?

"It's because of what you said this afternoon… I thought that maybe you were all talk when you accepted my request, and I was worried that you might not do anything."

"…i wouldn't do that to you."

Anyway, Nadeko pleads, *don't talk yet.*

i want him to be quiet until we're a little farther from Nadeko's house.

Otherwise i'll be a "pitiful girl."

For once, Mister Serpent does exactly what i ask–and after a bit, he tells me again, "I was worried."

When i hear him repeat it, it makes Nadeko think it wasn't out of "pretens." He really must have been worried.

And he must really feel relieved.

"It's not like I interviewed you and took your character into consideration to settle on you as my partner–if you were an irresponsible, half-hearted liar, my hands would've been tied. Not that I have any limbs, of course…"

His snake joke isn't very funny.

People say that Nadeko is "proan" to laughter, but i can't laugh at unfunny jokes.

"i don't do what i can't do… i can't do what i don't do, and i don't do what i can't do. That's all," Nadeko says, walking. "i…might be an irresponsible…half-hearted liar. You might be exactly right… At the very least, i can't promise that i'm not those things. i can't. But… Well, as far as finding your object of worship, Mister Serpent…i, uh, think i can do it…"

"I wonder. Do you really think you'll be able to find it when you're being that unenthusiastic?"

"…"

i feel pretty annoyed that Mister Serpent is still trying to "cuarrel" with me, and it does make Nadeko less interested in doing this, but yes, i guess you can't blame him for thinking that Nadeko isn't a serious girl after seeing the kind of class president she is and the way she acts towards her homeroom teacher.

And it's not like Nadeko is actually a serious girl… Of course, i don't like being called unserious, either…

"Will you listen to Nadeko, Mister Serpent?"

"Hm? What?"

"Well, it's…a grype, but will you listen?"

"…? Sure, I will. Go ahead."

"Well-behaved girls who are shy and bad at talking…quiet girls like Nadeko…weak girls who are bad at making friends and who cry over anything… For some reason, they're always thought of as 'virchus.'"

"'Virchus'?"

Oh, virtuous, Mister Serpent says.

Nadeko nods.

“And that’s probably why everyone tried to make Nadeko be the class president, and why Mister Sasayabu made that ridiculous request… But it’s not true… Nadeko’s not virchus or innocent, she’s not a ‘good girl’… Honestly, it’s kind of tough when you have to let down people who decided on their own to expect that of you,” i say, recalling Mister Sasayabu’s disappointed expression.

It really is a grype.

Not something i should be sharing.

But it’s just as tough to betray someone’s expectations as it is to have your expectations betrayed. Even if they’re unfounded.

“Which is why i ought to tell you now, Mister Serpent… Nadeko wants to do everything she can to atone for cutting your ‘breathren’ into pieces and killing them. But that’s not a guarantee that i’ll absolutely find your object of worship. And if that time comes, please…”

Don’t be disappointed.

Nadeko speaks the words then keeps walking.

She doesn’t look at the Serpent on her right wrist.

It took a good bit of courage just to say that. Courage has surprisingly bad cost-performance. It feels like i should have saved more for later when i think about the kind of work i’ll have to do–

“*Hsshh, hsshh.* Well, I don’t mean to force you to give me an absolute guarantee. I just can’t bear to have the search conducted unseriously–after all, you’re the only one I can rely on.”

“You just Kanbaru?”

“I just can’t bear to.”

“Can’t bare to… Um.”

In that case, Nadeko switches topics.

Not the way she changes the subject when it’s inconvenient with an “anyway” or a “that aside.” It feels like we’re finally about to dive into the real issue.

“Nadeko has to sleep at night, too, so i can’t stay up until morning searching…Mister Serpent. How should Nadeko look for your object of worship?”

The dowsing example was just a guess, not anything definite.

Unless he starts by telling Nadeko a way to find this object of worship, whose location and form we don’t know, there’s no figuring out where to go from here…

“*Hsshh, hsshh.* Just wander around this area for now–despite what I said earlier, it actually shouldn’t be too far from the shrine.”

“…Why?”

“I don’t really know how to answer that, but it seems only proper to start at the original location, no? It’s not like it was stolen or anything.”

“…”

So it wasn’t stolen?

But–even if it wasn’t, Nadeko somehow assumed it was *taken away by someone.*

After all, since an object of worship can’t move on its own, how could it disappear unless someone had it with them? It’s not going to walk off, is it?

…Still, it’s an aberration.

Not to mention it was a corpse worthy of being enshrined as a god. Maybe it really can walk on its own. It's only common sense that holds that dead bodies can't move. Vampires are like immortal corpses, so maybe you could say that corpses "night-walk," too.

"When it comes down to it, this object of worship is my body, a real, physical body. I'll certainly react if we pass near it–my body's going to vibrate, like a cell phone. At that point, you can look around the area and close in on the spot."

"So Nadeko just needs to keep wandering like this?"

That would kind of feel like a letdown.

i'm wearing a baseball cap right now, not a knit hat, but i still pull down the brim thanks to this feeling of being faked out.

Not that it means anything.

Just a habit.

"We start with that."

The Serpent's words seem to hint at a violent future, but Nadeko pretends not to notice.

She probably wouldn't hear a very good answer even if she pressed him.

i pretend not to know what i don't want to know.

And i pretend not to understand what i don't want to understand.

"…Do objects of worship get buried in the ground or stuck inside walls? In other words, could it be hidden somewhere?"

"Well–dunno. I have no idea what state it's in, either. Like you suggested, maybe it's even been sliced into pieces and scattered all around. Forget being hidden, maybe it's been crucified on a bunch of different trees. *Hsshh, hsshh.*"

“…”

He’s being nasty.

It doesn’t feel good, but of course it doesn’t, that’s what being nasty does.

i doubt it’s even possible to be nasty in a feel-good way.

“In that case, Mister Serpent… To summarize, Nadeko…just needs to go out every night…and walk around town…until she finds your object of worship.”

“Yep, that would be the summary. I wish you wouldn’t make it sound so pastoral, though.”

“i don’t need to fight any weird enemies or compete with rivals over what i’m looking for?”

“Yep… Hold on. Were you expecting a big adventure or something, Nadeko?”

“i wasn’t, but…”

i did imagine something like that–more anxiously than expectantly.

Which is why.

It’s–a letdown. Like i’m being left empty-handed.

“By the way, what happens when i find your object of worship?”

“What happens? Well, I leave you and *repossess* it instead, I guess… Of course, it’s my original body, so more like return into it?”

“…And when that happens, we part ways.”

“That’s right. Hmm? Why do you sound disappointed, dear? Don’t tell me you’ve gotten attached to me.”

“That’s not it…”

We've only been together for a day, not long enough to get attached, and frankly i have a hard time dealing with rough types like Mister Serpent.

It's a matter of personality, though, and not because he's a snake or an aberration.

"It's just that i'm bad at goodbyes."

"Hmm?"

"When someone…anyone, really… When they go away…it's tiresome, isn't it?"

"Tiresome? That's a weird way to put it–almost sounds like you're…"

Mister Serpent begins to say something in a suspicious–a very "doubious" and doubting–tone, but doesn't finish, which might be fortunate for Nadeko.

Because at that moment.

"Vzzzzzzzzzt♪"

Mister Serpent's white body, wrapped around Nadeko's right wrist, starts to shake rapidly–he compared it to a vibrating cell phone earlier, but i'm not sure how accurate the analogy is because i don't have a cell phone.

So if i were to compare it to anything, it's the way Nadeko's Dad's portable massager vibrates–to be honest, stronger than i imagined.

So strong it almost hurt. To use a scary figure of speech that isn't pastoral, i thought it might tear Nadeko's wrist off.

"Wh…What?"

"*Hsshh, hsshh*–look at that, a reaction already. Head toward your five o'clock, Nadeko!"

“N-Nadeko’s five o’clock?”

Which way is that?

i’m not going to understand him if he suddenly starts talking to Nadeko like we’re in some kind of movie.

“Make a clock in your mind. If the direction you’re facing, dear, is twelve o’clock, then go to five o’clock–in a diagonal direction behind you and to the right!”

“D-Diagonal behind Nadeko, to the right…”

i don’t quite get it even then, but Nadeko turns around as she’s told and starts going that way.

You could call Nadeko a yes-girl.

Of course, i’m walking in a town with streets, not in a desert or a jungle, so i can’t move diagonally behind and to the right in a beeline.

Going around the houses, with Mister Serpent giving slight corrections each time (he’s annoyingly detailed about it, telling Nadeko to go in this hour and that hour when there’s no point in telling her to go diagonally), i finally end up in a park.

Widely recognized as an indoor person, Nadeko never really played in parks even when she was little, but she still knew of this modest one.

i notice playground equipment like a jungle gym, a see-saw, and horizontal bars–apparently, they’re rapidly being removed from parks these days, but the “mewnicipal” government here must be putting it off.

Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

“Okay. Around here,” the Serpent says.

“Around here… But this is a sandbox.”

Yes, his dowsing, or maybe his navigation, has put us in the one place in the park you could just barely call safe in that sense, the sandbox–no, maybe even sandboxes are “inperilled” because *there could be glass buried inside* or for *sanitary reasons* or because *it’s dangerous if you swallow sand.*

…

Well, maybe not because it’s dangerous if you swallow sand.

Anything can be dangerous if swallowed, even food.

“Wh…What? So your corpse is buried in this sandbox?”

i said “corpse.” i didn’t mean to.

i could get in trouble if i don’t pay attention to how i phrase things–but it doesn’t feel quite right to call anything buried in a park’s sandbox an object of worship.

“Yep, I’m sure of it–*hsshh, hsshh!* Or, what, do you doubt the precision of my dowsing ability? Hmmmm?”

“i more than doubt it…”

Right.

Well, you could say doubt, but it’s more like not even wanting to debate the matter.

If it’s buried in a sandbox, it’s practically like some child hid it…no, it’s even at the level of a dog or a cat hiding it.

“…But, sure, if that’s what you say, Mister Serpent…i guess i’ll look.”

“What’s with the lack of enthusiasm?”

“i’m full of enthusiasm,” Nadeko counters as she takes the gardening trowel out of her knapsack.

i brought it because it seemed like the sort of item to take on a search (i have a lot of other things too, like rope and chisels)…but i never thought i'd be using it so soon.

"C'mon, hurry up and get digging. I'm certain my object of worship is buried down here."

"…"

"*Hsshh, hsshh*–it's like winning the lottery with your first ticket, hmmmm? Aren't you lucky, Nadeko. Just a half-hour stroll and you're already going to be free of me–"

He sounds so thrilled, he seems to have forgotten what Nadeko was saying. Mister Serpent generally comes across as a surly cynic, so i'm a little surprised to see him this excited.

Well–maybe it's only natural when you've discovered your own body.

So soon, too.

i don't know if the lottery analogy is appropriate, lacking, or exaggerated…but it's true that the chances were pretty low.

No wonder he's happy.

"…"

i stick the tip of Nadeko's trowel into the sandbox with a *scrunch.*

In any case, i'm already going to be saying goodbye to Mister Serpent, believe it or not–and when Nadeko thinks this, it does feel tiresome.

Nadeko's feelings aren't the least bit important, though–to be honest, you don't need to feel motivated just to dig up some sand, and in the end, it's just a later of sooner or matter, wait, no, a matter of sooner or later, because we were going to have to say goodbye at some point.

That point is now, that’s all.

Our time together was brief, but it’s not as if i wanted it to be long–and that isn’t a snake joke.

Time to say goodbye to Mister Serpent.

If i find his object of worship here.

012

i didn’t find it.

No matter how much i dug and dug, there was just plain sand. Before i knew it, i reached the bottom.

It was Nadeko’s first time learning that sandboxes have bottoms.

Though it’s obvious they do.

But according to Nadeko’s experiences as a child, sandboxes contained an endless amount of sand–like a bottomless swamp.

Well, i learned what was at the bottom of it all: concrete.

Apparently it’s just concrete buried in the ground in the shape of a pool…how inelegant. i’d rather not have known.

As far as its depth, i’d estimate it went down about two feet.

i guess that’s all the depth you need for it to seem infinite to a toddler.

“Mister Serpent.”

“…”

“Hey, Mister Serpent?”

“…”

Now he was being the silent one.

It’s like we’ve exchanged, no, reversed characters.

“Hey.”

Hey. Hey. Hey, Nadeko keeps calling to him stubbornly.

Since he’s enwrapped around her wrist, it’s not like i can give up and leave just because he’s fallen silent.

i might be “irittating” him, and i would leave if i could, but i’m also too tired even to move.

“It’s not here. Your object of worship.”

“…”

“It’s not here…”

Mister Serpent finally responds to this repeated statement with a *huh.*

He seems undaunted. Defiant, even.

“Looks like I malfunctioned.”

“M-Malfunctioned…”

He says it still sounding undaunted…and after telling Nadeko so confidently that he was certain, too.

After vibrating that furiously, like a hurricane, on someone’s wrist–a malfunction?

“I see, I see. So this can happen. What a learning experience. Isn’t that right, Nadeko?”

“I-If you malfunctioned, that’s fine, but…c-couldn’t you tell me sooner? You must have realized it a while ago…”

It’s rare for Nadeko to complain like this, but i can’t help it.

i didn’t just dig up one spot in the sandbox, i dug all around. You could play human whack-a-mole here.

Plus, i’m going to have to fill the holes back up and smooth them over.

So pointless and unproductive.

“What’s the matter, can’t you just leave it like that, hmmmm?”

“i can’t… It’ll be a ‘social issue.’ What if a child fell in and got hurt?”

“You worry too much…”

Maybe, but i need to try and make it look like the way it was, even if it won’t be the exact same.

In which case, this is all i’ll be able to do for tonight’s search. Even i don’t think it’s a good way to put it, but Nadeko’s first outing started and ended with her playing in a sandbox.

How juvenile.

“Still, you could malfunction?”

“Stuff happens. Even gods aren’t infallible.”

“Aren’t gods what they are because they’re infallible? Aren’t they supposed to be omniscient and omnipotent?”

“Infallibility and omnipotence are two different things–look them up in your dictionary if you want the details.”

“Hmph…i don’t have one. So is your not-infallible dowsing going to keep on malfunctioning? Because all the fruitless and wasted labor is going to be pretty tough on Nadeko in terms of both time and energy…”

“Don’t get so worked up, I know what it’s like when I malfunction now. It won’t happen again.”

He’s full of confidence.

That makes Nadeko trust him even less.

i think this is what you call a “wrash promise”–and it’s Nadeko who’s going to have to suffer for it. It’s no laughing matter.

Besides, Mister Serpent enwrapping Nadeko’s right wrist tires out her arm even more than it normally would when she uses the

gardening trowel. i don't think i'll get "tendanitis," but Nadeko's muscles might be sore tomorrow.

"Why do you malfunction, anyway? Is this like how the Missing Person Stick in *Doraemon* is only accurate seventy percent of the time?"

"No–that's not it."

i feel a little dissatisfied that the Serpent immediately understands Nadeko's obscur comparison thanks to our sharing some degree of knowledge, but in any case, he shoots down the question.

"It means that my spiritual energy is scattered–simply."

"Scattered?"

"Maybe I ought to say it's *been* scattered."

His energy has been scattered–um.

It sounds like something i've heard before–but where and when?

A hangout.

The *bad things* there–something.

Didn't Big Brother Koyomi end up needing to…

"So in other words," i ask the Serpent, "you're more metal detector than dowsing stick? Like finding buried landmines being harder if the sediment has a lot of iron in it…"

"Nadeko, are you comparing my body to a landmine, hmmmm?" he says venomously (being a snake), but considering how he doesn't go on, i might not be too far off.

Nadeko sighs.

If Nadeko is right, how many more pointless wastes of holes is she going to have to dig? And–what if we run out of time?

If we run out of time… Well, it's not Nadeko who'll be in trouble, but Mister Serpent…

Still, Nadeko hates wasted effort just as much as she hates having to try.

No matter what i say, though.

As far as this dowsing goes, this process of identifying the location of the item we're looking for, i have to leave it all up to Mister Serpent–in a sense, Nadeko is a living gardening trowel who just needs to believe and obey, whatever trouble she may or may not be put through.

Believe and obey. Just like someone serving a god.

"Well…in any case, i guess we'll try again tomorrow."

"Hold on a second, Nadeko. You're too good at calling it quits, what kind of brilliant gambler are you? Instead of giving up, why not try checking just one more spot?"

"No. i'm tired."

i've gotten tired. Miss Nadeko is now quite tired.

Turning a deaf ear to the Serpent's arguments, i get to work leveling out the sandbox–no, thinking of it as work makes it feel tiresome, so Nadeko imagines she's playing around and plowing the sandbox as she messes with the sand.

Maybe that was the problem.

Because i'm thinking of it as play, i'm not as efficient as i could be and take longer than i usually would–to give a detailed confession, i get so caught up in it that instead of just filling in the holes that i dug, i really do start to play, making little mountains and castles, and that was the problem.

You might also say Nadeko's luck ran out.

Given the outcome, i should have just agreed to Mister Serpent's request and moved somewhere else to search a little longer for his object of worship.

It's too late to put the genie back in the bottle, but don't you want genies out of bottles? It certainly sounds more fun…

"Oh, Sengoku. There you are."

Just as i'm building Nagoya Castle (in case there's some kind of copyright issue, we'll say something resembling Nagoya Castle) and having trouble figuring out how to angle the *shachihoko,* i hear a voice from above Nadeko's head.

i look up.

Nadeko wasn't doing a good job of keeping her cap on right.

Which is why our eyes meet.

"B…Big Brother Koyomi."

There, standing a step outside the sandbox, is Koyomi.

Big Brother Koyomi.

Legal name: Koyomi Araragi.

He's wearing a serious expression–in the middle of the night, too.

Is he taking a walk?

013

“Listen to me, Sengoku. If I were anyone else, I would be furious right now.”

Our location has changed to Koyomi’s house.

Big Brother’s room.

i’ve come here to play a few times since June, and it’s clean and tidy like you’d expect of him, but today–this one night, there’s no sense of fun and excitement in the air like on Nadeko’s other visits.

Just like the first time i came here, there’s strong tension.

…Unlike back then, Nadeko is being made to sit up straight on her knees, so you might even say it’s worse.

The difference is about as big as an amusement park and solitary confinement.

“Listen to me,” he repeats.

He just said something about not being furious, but he’s clearly angry.

It might be Nadeko’s first time ever seeing the Furious Version Koyomi. So this is how and why he gets mad.

It’s quite wonderful.

“Sneaking out of your house in the middle of the night and wandering around town for fun… If you keep that up, you’re going to turn out like me or Karen or Tsukihi.”

“…”

Whaaat.

That’s an odd way to put it.

If you're wondering why he's mad at Nadeko, he's scolding her for playing around at night–while i can understand chewing someone out for sneaking away when their parents aren't watching, Nadeko's playing around was just building something resembling Nagoya Castle. It doesn't seem so bad that he has to take her to his room and make her sit on her knees.

Well, i guess as someone with little sisters of a similar age as Nadeko, he couldn't help but feel anxious over her "dalinquent" behavior…

He even made Nadeko take off her cap.

Nadeko feels like she's in her birthday suit.

"I don't want to nag you or anything, but Sengoku, nighttime is for sleeping. Unless you're a vampire."

"…"

i can't tell him that i was looking for something.

Then again, he was searching, too, for Nadeko–when Nadeko's Mom and Dad noticed she had "runaway," the first person they thought to call was Tsukihi, or Big Brother Koyomi's little sister.

Tsukihi's fame extends to the PTA.

Tsukihi being Tsukihi, her reaction was, "It's fine, what's one night," and she even lied for Nadeko and said i was staying over, but Koyomi happened to pass by his little sister's room (pass by his little sister's room?) and to overhear this.

"What are you, stupid?! What if Sengoku goes extinct?!"

He apparently dashed out of their house to go looking around town for Nadeko.

i wasn't able to find what i was looking for, but Koyomi found Nadeko through his instincts alone. Even if you account for the fact

that he used his bike, he has incredible dowsing skills–quite unlike Mister Serpent, you might say.

On the topic of Mister Serpent, he's been silent for a while–he seems to be "adhearing" to his promise that he won't talk in front of people, but now that i think of it, he knows who Koyomi is.

That's what he said. That day in June.

He was watching from the shrine when Nadeko and Big Brother Koyomi and Miss Kanbaru conducted that richual at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine–so.

So i wonder what he's thinking watching Big Brother Koyomi now.

"Tsu…"

i feel like we're going nowhere at this rate, so i nervously begin to talk.

Nadeko wants to try her best to change the subject.

Not that Nadeko likes trying her best.

"Tsukihi… What's she up to?"

"Hm? Tsukihi? She's such a cold person that she's already getting her fill of sleep next door. Want me to wake her up?"

Swoosh, swoosh, Nadeko shakes her head.

That's not what i want at all… In fact, what a scary thing to say.

Koyomi might not really understand because she's his little sister, but Tsukihi is basically scary.

Tsukihi the Terrible.

They don't call her one of the Fire Sisters for nothing… Some of the stories about her aren't even funny.

She’s a good girl, though. And i’m not saying that to smooth things over, she’s really, truly a good girl.

It’s just that her absolute energy is on a different level from people like Nadeko.

You could even say a different dimension.

Not all good girls are law-abiding, you see.

“Sengoku? You don’t need to feel like it’d be a problem. Whether she’s awake or asleep, Tsukihi is always gonna have droopy eyes.”

“Leave her droopy eyes alone… But no, i already made trouble for Tsukihi… i even made her lie.”

i’ll need to get our stories straight soon–and before that, i need to thank her.

“Right. But first things first, you ought to apologize to your parents, Sengoku. I know I’ve told you again and again not to be so quick to say ‘I’m sorry’ since that’s your favorite phrase. Still, you need to apology to them properly this time around.”

“Y-Yeah… You’re right…”

“Sheesh, if i hadn’t found you, who knows what might have happened…”

Koyomi shrugs his shoulders like he’s both annoyed and relieved.

Um, “who knows what might have happened”? Probably nothing in particular…

i might have finished flattening the sandbox, tidied up the thing resembling Nagoya Castle, gone home…and, well, after getting yelled at by Mom and Dad, gone to sleep, woken up, and headed to school.

This is a safe town, anyway, not a big city like Tokyo.

Not much happens here.

Koyomi tends to worry a little too much about girls younger than him as you can tell from his interactions with Tsukihi and Karen.

You could even call him overprotective… i'm glad that he's kind to Nadeko, but i really do think he overdoes it with his attitude toward his little sisters.

He can go past protective and be prying.

What's he being so cautious of, anyway?

"You really need to be more cautious. Not just you, Karen and Tsukihi, too… It's almost like you don't realize that you're kids."

"i-i realize that…i think."

i'm not sure about Tsukihi or Karen–it can feel like they're trying too hard to act older than they are–but Nadeko thinks of herself as a kid.

A kid who doesn't know anything.

All i know is that a sandbox has a bottom.

"Well, no, it's not that you don't realize that you're a kid. You don't realize how indecently the world gazes upon children."

"…"

What an opinion.

i'm at a loss for words.

i have to wonder if Big Brother Koyomi is actually fighting against no one other than himself.

But also thinking that trying to make that point would be wrong, Nadeko apologizes.

"i'm sorry."

Nadeko's favorite phrase. Call it a conditioned reflex–in any case, it's a magical spell that ends conversations.

A magical spell, like one of those charms.

i'm not sure how effective it is, though.

"Well, as long as you realize what you've done… Hm? Wait, so what's going on? Why was a good girl like you walking around in the middle of the night?"

This also seems like the wrong time to argue that i'm not a good girl, and it doesn't make the question any easier for Nadeko to answer honestly.

The real reason is that i'm looking for Mister Serpent's object of worship…but i can't tell Koyomi that. If i were going to now, then Nadeko would have asked him for help from the beginning–and not lied on the phone.

This time.

i'm keeping it a secret–from Big Brother Koyomi.

After all–unlike June.

Nadeko isn't the victim.

Nadeko is guilty–of killing lots of Mister Serpent's breathren.

"Sengoku? Don't tell me…" Big Brother sounds suspicious that Nadeko has clammed up. "Don't tell me what you said on the phone yesterday was somehow a lie and you've gotten wrapped up in something bad…"

"…"

Nadeko's mouth turns into a straight line.

He really does have great instincts.

In fact, i feel like they're a little too sharp–i guess it's due to all his experience facing off against aberrations, the result of his long service record.

Well, i didn't get wrapped up in something, this time i've been enwrapped, so to speak.

This is what i think as i look at Nadeko's right wrist.

"N-No, that's…not it," i then say.

i won't claim to have spoken clearly or firmly–anyone would have heard the words as a makeshift excuse, a knee-jerk denial.

"Oh, really, it isn't? Good," Koyomi accepts them, sounding relieved.

…He seems to believe Nadeko.

i shouldn't be saying this as the person who lied to him, but he's a bit naïve.

He's too much of a good boy.

"I was so sure you weren't telling me how some aberration conned you into doing something for it, like searching for a lost object, and how that's why you were digging up that sandbox."

Bingo.

The only thing he didn't get right was that the aberration was taking advantage of Nadeko's weakness, her sense of guilt–Koyomi knows i chopped up and killed lots of snakes, but a serpent coming to complain to Nadeko about it is beyond even his imagination.

He really seems to believe–Nadeko is a decent person.

"N-No… That's not it at all. i-i just had… Well, there's a lot of issues in Nadeko's class right now, and…Nadeko is the president, and…"

i try to think of an appropriate excuse, but unable to come up with a lie out of thin air, Nadeko ends up telling a story adapted from her reality.

It's still a lie, of course.

"S-So…i've been feeling kind of tired…and suddenly felt like wanting to leave the house."

"Oh, I see. Yeah, that kind of thing happens."

Koyomi seems convinced.

It doesn't quite make sense for Nadeko to leave her house in the middle of the night because something bad happened at school, but the excuse seems to do a pretty good job persuading Koyomi, who hasn't had the best relationship with his parents after he started high school, and who even went through times when he didn't come home.

That must be why he's scolding Nadeko like this today, in particular.

He must have lots to say when he looks back on his own life.

"I do understand how you feel, Sengoku. But running away isn't going to fix things."

"Running away…isn't going to fix things."

"In that case, you should have come to me. So…what's this classroom trouble? Does it have anything to do with Kaiki's charms?"

"…"

He has such good instincts. He really does.

Yes, i did talk to him about it a little in the past–but he should already consider the case closed. Well, not just Koyomi, but everyone–Nadeko, her whole class. The case was solved as soon as Mister Deishu Kaiki left town.

There are problems that come out of solutions–new things to end that come out of endings–but this, too, Big Brother Koyomi would know a lot better than Nadeko.

“Nope,” i barely manage to deny.

But even Koyomi won’t swallow this one whole. He starts to look unpersuaded.

And–

“Sengoku,” he says. “You’re in middle school, so I’m sure you have problems and issues to spare–but you know you don’t have to take them on alone, right? True, I’m not someone who should be dispensing advice, but I can at least lend you an ear.”

“…”

He looks serious as he lets this be known.

When he’s being serious, he looks kind of trustworthy and also a little scary.

Because, usually, he’s just messing around.

“Listen, Nadeko. No man is an island.”

Now he’s starting to say stuff that’s making him sound like a school principal.

It’s so “buy the book” that i have to gulp–i nearly burst out laughing.

i can’t believe someone is saying it unironically in this day and age!

“…If I told you that, some people out there would complain, ‘I can’t believe someone is saying it unironically in this day and age’!” he turns the argument upside down.

i didn’t expect it to go in this direction. A surprise twist.

“Some would even say, ‘Sure, but you’re talking to an independent woman!’”

“…”

His tone is getting so heated i dare not talk.

If Nadeko were that elementary schooler Hachikuji who's apparently friends with Big Brother, i doubt she'd leave him alone when he's in such a state, but all i can do is watch and listen.

i can't even slip in a comment.

"What a sad interpretation. I bet people who say such things don't read books. That's one of the most famous lines of poetry out there!"

"…"

Technically, it isn't a poem.

"Or what, are we really islands, off on our own sticking our heads in the water instead of at least being peninsulas?!"

"…"

What could have happened to him over the last few months? i never knew him as the type to go on in this vein, even as a joke.

No.

That must be just how much Nadeko made him worry.

i feel ashamed.

i feel bad about what i've done.

i'll make sure i don't get caught next time.

Before going out, i'll make sure Nadeko's parents are completely asleep.

"Y-Yeah," i nod and agree as these thoughts go through Nadeko's head. "You're exactly right. From now on, i'll come to you if i'm ever in trouble instead of wrestling with it alone."

"I hope you do. You must be exhausted, so rest for today."

“Rest?”

“Hold on a second,” Koyomi says before leaving–and Nadeko finds herself all alone in his room.

Where did he go?

“H-Hey, Mister Serpent… Are we going to be okay? He didn’t catch on, did he?” i whisper. “Mister Serpent?”

Hm. There’s no reaction.

He’s just enwrapped around Nadeko’s right wrist, not moving an inch like he really is nothing more than a scrunchy, a plain, tacky scrunchy… i try shaking him, i try smacking him, i try smashing him into things, i try poking at him with the trowel, but he doesn’t even twitch.

Why not?

Sure, i want him to act like an accessory when we’re around people, and right now there’s no telling when Koyomi might return, so maybe the Serpent is being “prewdent” by just staying put…

Eventually–

“Thanks for waiting.”

Big Brother Koyomi is back.

In one hand he’s holding what looks like a thin kimono–a yukata for women, apparently.

“Here you go.”

“?”

“You can sleep in this. I borrowed it from Tsukihi.”

“What…”

i’m speechless.

i can sleep in it? In other words, pajamas?

Is he sure he didn't mean to say i could weep in it?

It would be strange if he said that, too, but… Is Big Brother Koyomi implying that Nadeko should stay over?!

"Stay the night here. It's late, after all."

Forget implying it, he said it outright.

Directly.

"We have to get our story straight to cover for the lie Tsukihi told, too."

"Tsu, Tsu-Tsu-Tsukihi… You borrowed this from her," i stammer, panicked. "S-So, in the end, you woke her…up?"

"Hm? Oh, no. I just barged into her room without asking, fished through her drawers without asking, checked on Karen's and Tsukihi's sleeping faces up close without asking, and borrowed it without asking. I don't think Tsukihi would mind."

"…"

i feel like there was a completely unnecessary step in there, but maybe it's Nadeko's imagination. She can't tell.

Still, sleeping over.

i can't hide how bewildered i am by the sudden new development crashing down on Nadeko's head.

As i take the pajamas (sleeping in a yukata–it's like i'm at a traditional inn) from Big Brother Koyomi, i'm still panicking.

"Wh-Which room should i sleep in?"

"Huh? Well, it's not like our house has that many rooms. You're just gonna have to sleep in here."

"I-In Big Brother's room…in Big Brother's bed!"

My panic starts to accelerate.

It’s not like he said anything about his bed.

i’m getting carried away.

“Hm? Well, yeah. You must be tired, so use the bed.”

Nadeko’s jumped gun landed a bullseye.

Nadeko is sharp today.

“Wh-What… Y-You use your bed, Koyomi! N, N-N-N, Nadeko can just sleep under the bed!”

“How do you even come up with that?”

That’d be terrifying, Koyomi mutters.

Yeah, i guess anyone, and not just Big Brother, would have trouble getting a good night’s sleep knowing that someone is lurking right below.

“Just use the bed. It’d turn into a huge problem if it ever got out that I made a middle school girl sleep under my bed. I’d be marked for the Fire Sisters’ terrible retribution.”

“B-But Nadeko can’t hog Big Brother’s bed and enjoy it all by herself…”

“Oh. No, no, it’s fine.”

While i continue to show as much consideration as possible, Big Brother Koyomi gets a smile on his face like nothing’s the matter.

“Two people could sleep in this bed no problem.”

014

That was the moment.

The light in the room has been casting Big Brother Koyomi's shadow onto the carpet, and a young blond girl comes flying out of it.

"Vampire Punch!"

The girl runs her fist straight into Koyomi's chin as she yells the words.

A perfect uppercut.

"Gaah!"

Koyomi bends backwards, then keeps tipping over to fall on the floor face-up.

So weak!

He let himself get defeated like some kind of punching-bag character you'd see at the very beginning of a battle manga. He was so weak you could compare him to a flimsy piece of paper.

"Hmph!" the young girl grunts, twisting in the air to land on the ceiling without a sound.

She's wearing a fluttering dress but does a good job holding its fabric between her thighs so that the hem doesn't flip up.

Her hair looks like it's standing on end, though.

…i believe the girl was wearing a helmet the last time i saw her–but it seems the helmet played out as a fad.

Yes.

It was a vampire who leapt out of Koyomi's shadow, no, the former vampire, Miss Shinobu Oshino.

Even i feel a little strange about calling someone who looks like an eight-year-old girl “Miss,” but according to Miss Shinobu, she’s actually five hundred years old. Normally, i might need to call her “Mistress” and not just “Miss.”

…Right.

She must be the same as Mister Serpent in that sense–and now Nadeko realizes why he’s been so quiet all this time.

Not because Koyomi was there, but because Miss Shinobu was *close by*–that’s why he’s been staying still.

If you just go by age, Mister Serpent must be the older of the two, and even if no one believes in him now, he’s still a god, while Miss Shinobu is a vampire. So you might not see the need–but then, Miss Shinobu is “King of the Aberrations” after all.

The ruler of unlife.

In other words, every aberration is food to her.

The title of “top of the food chain” fits Miss Shinobu better than anyone–she might easily gobble down Mister Serpent (especially at his current size).

Swallowing a snake alive would be a bad joke.

Not something you could laugh about.

“Phew… ’Twas a close call,” Miss Shinobu says still stuck to the ceiling and wiping the sweat from her brow.

Like someone who just finished a big job.

“We nearly ran afoul of some Tokyo publishing ordinances…good grief. My master’s lack of restraint is enough to drain the blood from even a vampire’s cheeks. I thought I might suffer a bout of anemia.”

“…”

It’s such a contemporary subject for her to touch on.

Not something you’d expect from a vampire, but Miss Shinobu seems to be influenced pretty heavily by Koyomi, so maybe it’s wrong to seek a level of refinement from her that matches her appearance.

“Now, then.”

Miss Shinobu drops from the ceiling.

Agilely, like some rhythmic gymnast, she avoids Koyomi and lands on the floor.

She follows that by rubbing her chin.

Around the same spot where she punched Big Brother.

“As our senses are linked, my master’s pain becomes mine as well, yet… Heh, so ’tis not a problem if I knock him unconscious before he has any chance to feel distress.”

“…”

What a frightening thing to say.

Koyomi is still on the floor and not moving a finger. Is this “rattling the brain with a punch to the jaw,” like in boxing?

Your brain getting rattled sounds pretty serious, though.

i mean, it’s your brain.

“Are ye all right, forelocked girl?” Miss Shinobu looks at Nadeko and asks.

Her gaze makes it seem like she’s not particularly interested in Nadeko–no.

Not being interested isn’t quite it–but in that case, i wouldn’t know how to describe her expression.

i can’t even read humans.

How would i ever read a vampire?

“What a pinch, ’tis good I made it in time. Ye nearly had to give birth to a child, at thy age.”

“W-Was it that kind of situation?”

“Well.” Miss Shinobu takes a step toward Nadeko–and i involuntarily flinch. “Looking at thee thus, I suppose I could understand–why my master is so infatuated with thee. Ye’ve quite the neat form.”

“…”

It’s scary when she stares at Nadeko up close.

i’m dealing with a vampire, after all.

While she might be lacking her bloodsucking ability at the moment…she can’t hide the fangs peeking from her mouth, and can’t seem to be bothered to.

Fangs.

Different from a snake’s–fangs.

“Hm.” Taking her eyes off of Nadeko, who’s frozen in place, Miss Shinobu then says, “Second cutest after myself!”

“…”

Is that praise? She’s evaluated Nadeko in a way that i don’t understand.

Still, Miss Shinobu coming close to Nadeko meant the opposite, too, and i got a good look at the “moddeling” of Miss Shinobu’s face…and she’s alluringly cute.

A lot cuter than Nadeko.

“Ah, um…M-M-Miss…Shinobu?”

“Utter not my name with such familiarity.”

Having nothing specific to say in mind, i address Miss Shinobu for no reason, with no mind, and she swats Nadeko down.

How do i explain it.

It feels like there's no room for compromise.

"For the more thy kind speaks my name, the tighter I am bound by it–not that I intend on reclaiming my old appellation at this point," Miss Shinobu says as she pulls Koyomi off the floor. He's dead weight, still passed out with no signs of waking up. "Be that as it may, a waif who has not been alive for so much as a decade shan't act familiar with me."

"…"

i have been alive for a decade, though, being in the second year of middle school.

But after how Miss Shinobu shut Nadeko out a moment ago, i don't have the courage to assert Nadeko's age, naturally. Not an ounce anywhere.

Pointing out a mistake also takes a certain license.

Privately, though, i think that she's become very talkative–when we first met in June (though i'm not sure it's right to say that we "met"), Miss Shinobu didn't speak a word and was even more taciturn of a person than Nadeko.

Well, of a demon, not a person.

No, wait. Was she more than half human now?

It's not like i've heard the details…and even if i did, i don't think i'd get it.

Regardless, i do feel a tinge of sadness that Miss Shinobu, someone i thought i knew to be a friend in silence, is now on the side of the talkers.

Well, i say that, but it's not like i really believed that we were buddies… Even in June, i got plenty of scary stares from her.

There's nothing in common anyway, not a thing, between Miss Shinobu back then, who was quiet because she was mad, and Nadeko now, who's quiet because she's scared and doesn't know what to do…

"Well, forelocked girl. As my master said too, 'twould be best for thee to sleep in that bed this night. Him, I shall take down to the first floor, to lay atop the sofa, so be at ease."

"Th…"

Thank you seems like the wrong thing to say.

Miss Shinobu probably saw it as having saved Big Brother more than Nadeko…so i pull the half-spoken words back to tell her:

"i'm sorry."

Even i don't know why i'm apologizing in this situation, but if i had to say, my meaning is *i'm sorry for making you do all this work for the sake of someone like Nadeko.*

"Hmph…what an apologetic girl thou art."

"…"

"But I do wonder. Are ye apologizing because ye feel bad, or because ye've read the mood–*this situation would involve an apology*–like one would a script?"

"…"

"Good morning when ye wake up, good night when ye go to bed, thank thee for the meal when ye eat. Is it the same for thine apologies?"

"…"

“Silence, eh. Well, I am in no place to find fault in that–having been quite silent in like manner myself.”

“…”

“Kakak.”

Whatever it is that she found funny–she laughs at Nadeko, who is now just waiting, her eyes downcast, for Miss Shinobu to carry Koyomi out of the room.

It sounded scornful.

But maybe the best way to describe it would be mocking.

i feel like–she’s looking down on Nadeko.

“Kakak–kak. Kakak.”

“…? U-Um,” i can’t help but ask.

i end up asking even though i shouldn’t.

But, and maybe it’s because the two are linked, being laughed at this way by Miss Shinobu–practically feels like being laughed at by Big Brother.

i know it can’t be true–but that’s why.

Nadeko can’t stop herself from asking.

Also–i feel anxious. Mister Serpent is still pretending to be a scrunchy on Nadeko’s right wrist, but there’s no guarantee his mimicry is working on Miss Shinobu, no matter how good he is.

i doubt Miss Shinobu would just go ahead and devour Mister Serpent now that she seems to be on good terms with Koyomi…but since an aberration is enwrapping Nadeko’s wrist, it wouldn’t be surprising if i seemed suspicious.

She might even tell Koyomi about it once he’s conscious again precisely because they’re on good terms…

“Wh-What’s…so funny?”

“Funny? Nay, there’s nothing funny. I simply laughed since it all makes sense. Did I not just tell thee? That I understand–why my master should be infatuated?”

“…”

i don’t have to ask to know that by “master” she means Big Brother…but why is it?

The Koyomi i’m hearing in Miss Shinobu’s words sounds like someone very far away from Nadeko.

“’Tis merely that I understood anew. When ye cast down thy face, and thine eyes, timid and frail, and with thy whole body say, ‘Aye, I am pitiful as I do seem,’ it arouses not just in my master but in a vicious being such as myself, a desire to shelter–”

“…”

Pitiful. A pitiful–girl.

“But speaking of vicious–forelocked girl. Shall I explain to thee why cuteness too is quite the vicious weapon?” continues Miss Shinobu, in a mean-spirited tone.

Yes.

Her smile now is different even from her sneer a moment ago. It must be what Koyomi calls her “gruesome smile”–back in June, Miss Shinobu was a vampire who never so much as cracked one, but this smiling face makes her seem only the more frightening.

“A beast’s offspring, or a human’s for that matter, arousing the desire to shelter it through appearance or manner is a weapon, by use of which the weak survive. Nay, perhaps not just the weak? Even I have seen others grow careless through no act of my own but by dint of my adorable looks–hmph. The same would apply for that little Ononoki from the other day.”

"…"

"Mimicry–one could call it. The opposite of a warning color, mayhap."

Then.

Miss Shinobu seems to glance at Nadeko's right wrist and smirk–i don't know, it could be Nadeko's imagination.

Maybe i'm being too self-conscious because Nadeko is hiding something…

Still, her body starts to quiver.

Her tongue is tied, and talking is out of the question.

"Cuteness is a weapon rivaling strength–but I am not about to argue that I, as one with both, am therefore the most powerful of all. That should go without saying. I simply mean to observe 'tis fortunate that ye can make murderous intent vanish by naught more than quaking thus."

"…"

That's–no.

Is that fortunate?

Nadeko is well-behaved, quiet, shy around people–so they just assume she's a serious and good girl–and force her to be class president and do things no one else wants to do–

It's one misfortune after another. Betraying one expectation after another.

Letting people down–is so painful.

"i-i'm not…fortunate."

"Really? Hmm? Are ye not always treated with kindness for merely staying quiet? Are ye not thought of as intelligent for merely

staying quiet? Are ye not thought of as thoughtful for merely staying quiet? Do they not smile even when thou art incapable? Is silence not all ye need to avoid anything unpleasant? Are ye not valued more than others for doing the same work? Are ye not admired more than others for uttering the same words? Are ye not spared the world's wrath even in failure? Are ye not forgiven even for thy lies?"

"Th-That's…" Nadeko shakes her head, "That's what i can't stand. It isn't fortunate… I-It's like discrimination, and N-Nadeko–"

"When thou art troubled." i put everything Nadeko had into her reply, but Miss Shinobu refuses to listen–and just goes on, ignoring Nadeko like she isn't there at all. "Do others not come of their own will to rescue thee–in a quarrel, do others not assume thee to be the victim?"

"…"

"Hm. Perchance 'twas a performance on thy part, but I suppose not. In other words, that cuteness, those mannerisms, are natural, the result of no special exertion. Devoted to my own self-improvement as I am, my envy is boundless," Miss Shinobu deadpans, not sounding the least bit envious.

The sense that she's looking down on Nadeko is as strong as ever.

If anything, it's only growing.

"Do ye know what we call the naturally cute such as thyself?"

"…"

"Come now, 'twas a question–answer it if ye wish."

Uh oh.

Nadeko can answer it if she wishes…

"i…i don't know. V…'Vishus'?"

“Devilish,” states Miss Shinobu, overruling Nadeko.

Devilish. Devilish?

“Thou art easily more monstrous than any aberration, if ye would–kakak,” Miss Shinobu laughs again. “Nay, ’tis fine, ’tis fine. My apologies, that went too far. What am I, of all creatures, saying to a mere human? Ye need not change. Live as such, ’tis none of my concern. Live as such and die as such. Aye, let Big Brother Koyomi worry over thee for the rest of thy life.”

With that, Miss Shinobu finally takes him and leaves the room, not so much carrying as dragging him, like he’s a bit heavy.

Out in the hallway, she looks back and opens her mouth again. Her eyes aren’t just looking down on Nadeko but brimming with contempt.

“Aren’t ye glad ye happen to be cute.”

015

As i wake up the next morning, i find Tsukihi sleeping next to Nadeko.

"……"

While i don't scream, that isn't to say that i'm not surprised.

i'm so surprised that i can't make a noise.

i'm super surprised.

You could say that i let out an ultrasonic scream.

i thought Nadeko's throat and lungs might give out.

It seems like wanting to sleep next to Nadeko is something that runs in the Araragi family… Tsukihi is sound asleep and holding onto Nadeko like a hug pillow.

Nadeko can't move.

Nadeko's going to repeat herself here because some explanation might be needed. Tsukihi is scary. It's common knowledge in the middle school community just how brutal she is.

How she can get so out of control that people even compare her to a nuclear weapon.

Who else can claim to know just how frightening it is to wake up and find yourself in the arms of a nuclear weapon? But i guess the image of being in the arms of a nuclear weapon is kind of a "sirreal" one.

i don't like being touched by people, it makes Nadeko feel icky no matter who it is, even if it's her parents. But there's nothing i can do when i'm being restrained like this, especially when it's Tsukihi doing the restraining.

All i can do is turn ashen.

“Mmh…”

Then, as i’m doing all of this–in other words, nothing–Tsukihi wakes up with Nadeko in her arms.

“Wh-Whoa! Nadeko!”

“…”

“You scared me there!”

Tsukihi leaps out of bed.

She tries to get away from Nadeko and rolls off the bed in the process. She’s overreacting… She really is different from Nadeko, isn’t she?

Are we really the same age? Are we really both girls?

“Wh-Why are you in my big brother’s bed, Nadeko?! I thought I had my arms wrapped around him, not you!”

“…”

She’s made an extremely awkward statement.

It seems that around dawn, Tsukihi sleepily rolled into Big Brother Koyomi’s bed–he’s always being woken up by Tsukihi and Karen, but…i guess that wasn’t all there was to it?

i guess there was more to it?

Anyway, i look around the room.

Hm. Karen doesn’t seem to be here…

“Good morning, Tsukihi,” i say.

i ought to, it’s morning.

“Y-Yeah… Good morning, Nadeko.”

By the way, while Tsukihi and i used to call each other “Sen” and “Rara” when we were in elementary school, that started to feel a little too juvenile and lately we call each other by our given names.

N-No.

This isn’t the time to be providing that sort of commentary.

Rising, Tsukihi straightens out the hemline of her yukata, which got ruffled when she tumbled out of bed, and stands. Her yukata matches Nadeko’s, and it feels somehow weird.

Of course, the same must go for Tsukihi, or rather, seeing one of her yukatas worn by Nadeko without permission (timewise, i doubt Koyomi explained the situation)–

“?”

She looks puzzled.

Her expression says she’s wondering if she’s still half asleep or in a dream.

Koyomi mentioned this too, but Tsukihi’s notable for her droopy eyes. She looks very sleepy, though she probably isn’t.

“Uh. Um… Th-This isn’t…what you think,” Nadeko tries to excuse herself incoherently.

Her biggest fear right now is Tsukihi misunderstanding and thinking, *Nadeko borrowed one of Tsukihi’s yukatas without asking and just went ahead and slept in Koyomi’s bed.*

Tsukihi has the strongest possible tendencies towards having a thing for her brother (sorry), and if someone like her got that misunderstanding, i could even end up on the bad side of every middle schooler in the neighborhood.

That would be scarier than getting possessed by any aberration.

“Er, um… Tsukihi, Big Brother Koyomi told–”

“Nadeko! Did you disguise yourself as me and assault my big brother?!”

“…”

Her misunderstanding easily exceeds what Nadeko “antissipated.”

Seriously, what a scary little sister…

No, what scary siblings.

She is her big brother’s little sister.

“Now, that’s bold!”

She seems happy for some reason and gives Nadeko a thumbs up–while there may have been some amount of misunderstanding, the situation seems to be acceptable.

i can never get a read on Tsukihi…

i can’t even guess what might affect her mood.

“Wh…What about Karen?” i ask hesitantly.

The Fire Sisters are advertised as always acting as a pair, so just because one of them isn’t here, Nadeko can’t afford to relax.

Nothing extreme should happen as long as Tsukihi, the brains of the operation, has given her blessing, but i still want to be careful.

If things go poorly, Nadeko is going to get kicked with no room for excuses.

“Hmm, I dunno… I think she might be jogging…”

Oh?

A vague answer, somehow–are the Fire Sisters not as joined at the hip as i’ve heard?

Or did something happen recently, something that changed the Fire Sisters' dynamic–even if it wasn't a fight or a rift?

"Anyway, Nadeko. Great to see you again," Tsukihi greets Nadeko after all that–however late, though, manners are manners.

She's staying polite regardless of how close we are, having just shared a bed. While the two of us might have been classmates in the past, we're in different schools now. Nadeko and Tsukihi aren't really that close, and a proper greeting is a must.

"N-Nice to see you again," i say. Nadeko holds her head low–but part of the reason is that i'm embarrassed to have my face seen right after waking up.

"Yep."

Tsukihi grins.

Speaking of being late to it, i notice now that Tsukihi's hairstyle changed while we didn't see each other in a while–well, she changes hairstyles the way you change outfits, so i really am being late to it.

Nadeko isn't fashionable, so i don't know what the hairstyle is called, but it feels all jaggy everywhere.

It's perfectly between stylish and avant-garde… i could never manage such a hairstyle, which must attract a lot of attention.

Actually, all Nadeko does with her hair is grow out her bangs. The rest she trims herself without much thought.

i've never been to a salon or anything. i don't like it when people touch Nadeko's hair or her scalp… Apart from that, having to socialize with the hairdresser throughout would be too much for Nadeko.

Of course, never having been to one, her image of the socializing you do at a salon is all the product of her imagination.

“Oh, I get it,” Tsukihi says. “My brain’s finally starting to work. So Koyomi found you and brought you here. Which means he let you have his bed and is sleeping on the first floor. Aw, what a gentleman.”

Wow. No wonder she’s the brains of the Fire Sisters.

Her shot made it onto the green.

Aside from the part about him being a gentleman, she was basically right.

“S-Sorry, Tsukihi…for the trouble. For making you lie for Nadeko. That must have been annoying, right? Getting a call from Nadeko’s Mom and Dad in the middle of the night…”

“Hahaha, it wasn’t that late. And I was listening to the radio, anyway. Plus, I’m used to coming up with alibis for my friends. Don’t worry about it.”

“…”

It’s not very proper of her, but it’s her impropriety that saved Nadeko, so there’s nothing i can say to it.

Still, as far as Nadeko’s parents go, they were fools to have believed her.

“I told Koyomi you’d be fine on your own since you’re not a kid anymore, but I guess he went to look for you anyway–and while I think he worries too much and is overprotective, what’s amazing about him is that he did figure out where you were.”

“Y-Yeah… Big Brother Koyomi is amazing,” i nod.

But Tsukihi’s words stick with me–no, it’s not the words themselves, but they make Nadeko think about what happened last night…

Worries too much. Overprotective.

A meddler.

Big Brother Koyomi.

Knowing that he thinks about Nadeko that way, though…

“Hmm? What’s the matter, Nadeko? Not feeling well? Keeping your head bowed like that. I can’t get a look at your cute face.”

“P-Please.”

Don’t say that, Nadeko begs, lowering her head even more.

Last night, i couldn’t even manage that weak of a reply.

“Don’t say that… i’m not cute.”

“Hmm?” Tsukihi tilts her head further.

“N-Nadeko…isn’t cute.”

“Whaaat? What the heck? You’re cute, Nadeko, you really are. You’re so cute, you’re super cute, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that you’re the cutest thing alive on the entire planet. You know why it’s spelled that way, right? Because everyone wants to C-U. You’re cute, cute, cute, cute, cute! I thought it as soon as we were put in the same class that April in second grade. I thought, whoa, she’s cute!”

Tsukihi attacks with a surge of *cute*’s as if to snuff out Nadeko’s already faint objection. i don’t just want to shrink, Nadeko wants to cover her body in bedding and roll up into a ball. “Feeling shy” doesn’t begin to describe it.

“Yeah, second cutest after me!”

“…”

She follows up with the same remark as that vampire.

Tsukihi looks like such a sleepy girl, but she has a frighteningly strong sense of pride and so much self-respect.

Could she even be an aberration, too?

She actually might be. She does seem supernatural, in various ways.

“I mean, I knew it the moment I saw you,” she continues. “‘Oh, I need to be friends with this girl! It’d be a huge loss if I can’t become friends with her!’”

“Th-Then…” i say. Something that i shouldn’t. “I-If Nadeko wasn’t cute…we wouldn’t have become friends…maybe?”

“Hm?”

Nadeko asked her question with her eyes still cast down, but i don’t have to see Tsukihi to know that she’s openly doubtful.

“Doubtful” makes it sound better than it is.

Despite the girlish “Hm?” she replies with, it’s so much like the “Hmmmm?” that Mister Serpent likes to tack on to mean, *What is this dumbass even talking about?*

This is the scary Tsukihi.

A dalinquent is a pushover compared to her.

“Excuse me? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“i-i’m sorry… I-It’s nothing.”

“No, I didn’t ask for an apology. I didn’t ask if it was something or nothing. I asked you what it’s supposed to mean. Think you could tell me, Nadeko?”

“…”

i’m scared. Why is this happening to Nadeko first thing in the morning?

“What, did you not hear me? Are you not listening? Or is it that you can’t answer my question or don’t want to?”

“i…i’m sorry.”

“Like I told you, I didn’t ask for an apology. What, am I phrasing it wrong? Is it my fault? Or are you apologizing because you feel guilty about something? Did you do something to me that’s making you feel bad? Are you thinking something that’s making you feel bad?”

“N-N…”

i’m scared i’m scared i’m scared.

It’s so not how a middle school girl picks fights.

i mean, Tsukihi has her fists clenched.

The angle of Nadeko’s downturned eyes means that i have a clear view of Tsukihi’s knees, instead of her face, which i’m avoiding, and on top of them she’s balling up her fists tighter and tighter.

Moreover, she’s not doing it out of anger. She has her thumbs on the outside like you would in martial arts. Tsukihi’s making a powerful statement: *I might punch you depending on how you answer.*

And also: *If you don’t answer, I’m going to punch you all the same*…

i’m scared.

Though i am, i also think something else, which is, *Wow*–it’s hardly the time, but i can’t help it.

Wow. Really, wow.

How is she popular with such a personality?

There must be lots of good things about Tsukihi that more than make up for it–that’s what i think.

Yes.

Meaning, of course–*it’s not just her cuteness.*

“All right. I’m punching you. In the stomach.”

“Wait! i’ll tell you, i’ll tell you, i’ll tell you!” Seeing Tsukihi pop up without any hesitation in her movement or indecision on her face, her anger boiling over all too easily, Nadeko holds her own hands up toward the ceiling and submits loudly and fluidly like you’d never expect of her under normal circumstances. “Y-You see, Nadeko was told that by someone. This person said to her, ‘Aren’t you glad you happen to be cute.’”

In fact, it was a vampire, not a person, but i’m not going to be that honest–it’ll just sound like a lie even though i’m telling the truth.

Nadeko would get punched. In the stomach. The fact that it’s not her face proves Tsukihi’s not bluffing.

“‘Aren’t you glad you happen to be cute’?”

“Y-Yes… R-Right. Y-You did a good impression. Perfect.”

“Um, I wasn’t trying to do an impression…”

Still, the praise doesn’t seem to offend Tsukihi, and she looks a little bashful as she sits back down.

So praising her works. How easy…

Actually, i fudged the diction, so it wasn’t even possible to do an impression.

Aren’t ye glad ye happen to be cute.

Those are the precise words Miss Shinobu spat out–with a faint smile on her face.

“B-But…it, this, wasn’t Nadeko’s first time… People have been telling her for a long time. Th-That all i am is cute… i’m all looks… Things like that.”

All you are is cute.

It was–a friend who said so.

A girl i thought was Nadeko's friend.

Who i thought was Nadeko's best friend–

The girl who put the "charm" on Nadeko.

"That 'it's not fair, when you never do anything'–"

"Huh… But in the end, isn't that just jealousy?" asks Tsukihi. "Try rephrasing it, and you'll see what a weird thing it is to say. Like, 'Aren't you glad you happen to be smart,' or 'Aren't you glad you happen to be fast,' or 'Aren't you glad you happen to be rich'–once you put it that way, there's nothing in the world that doesn't just happen to be the case."

"Yeah. That's true, but–"

"What about me? I 'just happen' to be my big brother's little sister."

"…"

So the first thing Tsukihi comes up with for her strong points is having Koyomi as a big brother?

How terrifying. Just how does she see herself?

"Don't worry about it. I didn't think you'd run away from home or anything when you were taking that walk last night, but actually, did you? Because someone said that to you?"

"N-No…"

She has the order backwards.

But it's true that Miss Shinobu saying those words to Nadeko was such a big shock that it made her want to run away–not the words themselves, but something like the hostility in them.

A hostility meant to hurt Nadeko.

It was a shock.

“Nadeko. The question of whether or not I’d have become your friend if you weren’t cute doesn’t have anything to do with reality, and I think it’s meaningless. In fact, I think there’s all kinds of issues that come up the moment you ask that question, so I’m not answering it.”

“…”

“But if you still want me to answer it, I’d have to tell you that I wouldn’t have become your friend. Well, is that what you want me to say? Are you satisfied, does it make you happy? Is that what you’re trying to get me to say? Do you win if I do?”

“N-No…”

“No? Then do you hate yourself for being cute?”

“Th-That’s not it… But when they make it sound like that’s all Nadeko is…”

i don’t like it, i say.

i said it quietly, so Tsukihi might not have heard Nadeko.

Which is why i continue. Like it’s an afterthought.

“i-i want Nadeko’s worth…to be more in a place that isn’t visible.”

“Your worth?”

“B-Being smart, or athletic…or having a great personality. Something with more…value, even if it just happens to be the case… Oh, um, yeah, something more like a talent…”

“I don’t think that’s any different.” Tsukihi shrugs, like she’s gone beyond anger and has just given up. “And people with something more like a talent might feel the same way. They’d probably feel hurt

if they were dismissed for not being cute. That's no reason to reject who you are."

"B-But Nadeko…isn't cute because she wants to be cute."

So.

i'm lucky because i'm cute, it's not fair, it's cheating–i hate it when people say those kinds of things.

No, i don't hate it.

It's–tiresome.

It makes Nadeko tired, both physically and mentally.

"Being treated special just because i'm cute…"

"Makes you feel guilty," Tsukihi finishes Nadeko's line.

She's sharp–but doesn't need to be in this case.

Anyone could figure it out. As long as you aren't Nadeko.

"Is that why you grow out your bangs to hide your face?"

"…"

"I thought it was because you're shy and don't like making eye contact…but Nadeko. While you can hide your face, you can't hide the way you act, okay? You can't hide your voice. I mean, everything that makes its way out of you is cute, Nadeko."

"…"

"Then again, wanting what you don't have is human–Karen worries about how she's too tall, and I have times when I think, *If only I wasn't Koyomi's little sister.*"

Her strength and her weakness is the same thing, and that thing is Big Brother Koyomi?

Seriously, how awkward.

Could you please not be so frank?

What would have happened to Tsukihi if she weren't Koyomi's little sister?

"I see. So that's why you grew out your bangs," Tsukihi says, as if to make sure. "And that's why you normally never dress up and always wear lame-looking clothes."

"…"

Uh-uh.

Nadeko's clothes aren't–

"That's why you have a tacky scrunchy on."

"…"

"That's why you do all of it–fine. In that case, let me give you one piece of advice that takes all of that into account."

"A-Advice?"

"Yep. Listen carefully. Umm…" Tsukihi nods before continuing. With a broad smile on her face. "I understand what you're saying, but still, you, just-cute Nadeko, didn't do anything wrong, stupid."

"…nkk!"

As decisive as could be.

It's such an awful remark that i can't even react with shock.

i know there's no room for it, but i feel like i heard her wrong.

Actually, i'm impressed by her all over again. Talking to a depressed Nadeko, Tsukihi hasn't said a single kind or comforting word yet.

Wow. She really, truly is amazing.

Meanwhile, despite everything, in the end i want to hear a kind or comforting word, which makes Nadeko feel so ashamed.

“If you hate it when people favor and praise you just because you’re cute, then just work on improving other parts of yourself. Give it some effort, try your best. Why try to cancel out your cuteness instead? You’ve got it totally backwards, I don’t get it.”

“G-Give it some effort, try your best?”

“Yeah. That’s what everyone does.”

“…”

There’s nothing i can say to that when she slips it in so casually.

Well, i know she’s right, but…

i know she’s very, very right, but.

“B-But, Tsukihi.”

“What?”

“G-Giving it some effort, trying your best…is…tiring.”

“…”

Tsukihi is silent for a moment, then says, “Nadeko, that’s so you. It’s that laziness of yours…or maybe lethargy, that I like about you.”

“…”

“But I wonder. I don’t really know, how does it feel when someone seconds your faults like that?”

“Huh?”

Tsukihi’s words make Nadeko snap out of it.

Second your faults?

“Like, ‘You’re sloppy but I like that about you!’ Or ‘I love how you’re so foulmouthed,’ or ‘I like how there’s always a shadow about

you!' or 'I like how you're so clumsy!' I wonder what it feels like to be told that kind of thing. Does it feel bad, or does it make you feel better, which is it?"

"…"

"Who even said that to you, anyway?"

"Wh-Who…"

Tsukihi just went to her next question without waiting for Nadeko's answer to the first one.

"i, um, can't really tell you…"

"Was it Koyomi by any chance?"

"N-No… Big Brother wouldn't," i deny firmly before any false doubts get cast on him. Then again, it was a vampire mentally linked to him, Miss Shinobu Oshino, who said it to Nadeko, so maybe i don't sound too firm.

It's not like that's why, but i stick on something like a footnote.

"B-Big Brother Koyomi is kind…"

"Yeah. I know he's kind. I know that better than you. But it's exactly why he sometimes says things you don't want him to."

Things he shoudn't, you see. No, maybe things that–he doesn't need to, Tsukihi adds.

"…"

"Wait, so you have a crush on him, don't you?"

The ace up her sleeve comes from nowhere.

And she's laid her hand right on the table.

It feels like the game changed right as i thought we were playing poker.

No, her straight question is making Nadeko want to flush, so maybe it's still poker. Right, Tsukihi doubled down.

"Wh-What might you possibly mean by that?"

i'm so shaken that i speak in a stilted way. i sound like the culprit in a classic detective novel.

Then again, that's pretty much the position i'm in…

"Wh-Where is your evidence…"

"Hey, you don't need to hide it. Everyone can tell, anyway. It's so obvious. The only person too dim to notice is probably Koyomi."

"…"

"I thought you might be happy you got to sleep in Koyomi's bed last night–"

Tsukihi says this.

No way.

Nadeko isn't such a shameful girl and didn't take off her yukata and sleep naked in his bed for just a second–i want to say so but can't get the words out. i'm not panicking, but i'm a step away from it.

Well, sure, for a number of reasons, Tsukihi, if no one else, would have figured it out by now…

"–And I thought it's because Koyomi said 'aren't you glad you're cute' or whatever that you're feeling bothered."

"…It wasn't him," i correct, but maybe Miss Shinobu's words did cast a gloom over Nadeko's heart.

Still.

“Still, i wonder if Big Brother worries about Nadeko the way he does, even spending the whole night looking for her, only because she’s cute…”

“Maybe, if you’ve got nothing else going for you.”

Tsukihi is ruthless.

She really doesn’t have an ounce of “ruth.”

What part of her makes her Big Brother’s little sister? Well, true, their faces do look very much alike.

“My brother has a thing for cute girls… No, no, I’m kidding, I don’t think that’s true. Because he’ll help anyone. Your cuteness doesn’t mean a thing to him.”

“…”

“That doesn’t satisfy you, either? My, you’re selfish.”

“No, that’s not it…”

i was just trying to figure out who’s right, Miss Shinobu or Tsukihi. But–it’s not like only one of them can be right, i’m sure.

Shinobu, whom he’s linked to.

Tsukihi, his little sister–each of them sees things in her own way, they each have their interpretation. Which is why Nadeko needs to have her own way of seeing Nadeko, her interpretation of herself, but–

Nadeko has nothing. No interpretation at all.

Her own feeling. Her own thinking.

i don’t even try.

“By the way, Nadeko, in that case, the flip side might be that you’re being my friend just because I’m ‘Big Brother Koyomi’s’ little sister.”

“What? Th-That’s…”

i panic.

Then i remember the rumors about that girl who supposedly became friends with Nadeko just to get closer to a boy.

Remembering–only makes Nadeko panic more.

“That’s not true… i mean, the order’s all reversed… i-i came over to your house to play because we became friends in second grade, and that’s when i met Big Brother Koyomi…”

“Hmm. But you started to hang out with me again during first semester this year because of Koyomi, right? In other words, because I’m my big brother’s little sister?”

“…”

“That kinda stuff,” Tsukihi drops her serious tone after realizing that Nadeko has gone silent. “It doesn’t feel good when someone asks you that kinda stuff, yeah? Regardless of whether it’s true or not–see, that’s what you were asking me a minute ago. You didn’t even consider how it’d make me feel.”

“i’m sorry.”

Yikes.

Again, Tsukihi isn’t looking for an apology–

“B-But it’s not like i hang out with you only because you’re Big Brother’s little sister… Though i do think you’re scary.”

“What?”

“E-Er, i meant to say you’re slary.”

“Slary…”

Nadeko has failed to talk her way out of it.

Still, i have to admit i can kind of see Tsukihi's point now–while things did happen in a different order, second-grade Nadeko, who didn't like dealing with people just as much then as now, came over to play at Tsukihi's house every single time she was invited–not only because of how pushy Tsukihi was, but also because of Koyomi, no mistake.

So in that sense.

Nadeko isn't in a position to complain or grumble.

Yes. Not even about that friend.

"I've always wondered about that, actually. I was waiting for my chance to ask–Nadeko. Why did you start to like my big brother so much?"

"Wh-Why?"

"No, wait, you don't have to tell me. I'm sure there was one thing or another. A long time ago. When we were in elementary school. After all, my big brother's cool. He's kind. He's dreamy. And he used to be smart."

"…"

Such smooth praise for her own brother.

i'm a little frightened, no, not just a little.

"You don't need a reason to like someone…and you can also take that to mean you can like someone for any reason. From being cute to being someone's little sister, any at all. But–Nadeko. What made you keep liking him for six years straight?"

"Wha…"

"The only time he and you had any contact was back during second grade, right? When he was in sixth grade. He started to try to act cool once he got to middle school and mostly stopped playing

with girls younger than him… You probably didn't even see him for six years. So how did you manage to keep liking him?"

"…"

"To me that seems, how do I put it…way beyond simple devotion…"

In fact.

When Big Brother Koyomi saw Nadeko again after six years–he'd forgotten all about her.

That's natural, it's not like he's particularly cold or has a bad memory–at least, i don't think you can blame him.

It's just that Nadeko remembered him, one-sidedly.

Abnormally, i remembered him.

"Th-That's…but," i say. Nadeko is in excuse mode. "But i heard rumors about him even after i was in third grade… Y-You know, he was the most active when he was in middle school, right?"

Just like how you and Karen started operating as the Fire Sisters once you got to middle school, Nadeko blabs on.

i've suddenly turned talkative, and just as you'd expect, Tsukihi doesn't hesitate to give Nadeko a suspicious look.

"I guess," Tsukihi nods anyway. As Big Brother's little sister, she must know better than anyone just how active he was during middle school–how mischievous he was, you could even say. So.

As an excuse.

Nadeko's words must have been pretty convincing.

"True, even after he got to high school…my brother was something of a celebrity. He seems to think that he's a regular, average high schooler for some reason, though."

“Big Brother Koyomi’s concept of a regular, average high schooler seems pretty different from most people’s…”

“Yeah… I suppose you consider yourself the norm. Insisting that you aren’t cute, for instance, even when you are.”

“…”

Sure, Nadeko misspoke earlier, or even vented her anger, but still, Tsukihi is being rather persistent.

In contrast to the laid-back Karen, Tsukihi tends not to let things go.

i wonder if she’s about ready to free Nadeko.

“Y-Yeah…so it’s not weird,” i argue. “It’s normal to keep on liking someone for just six years.”

“Just six years… That’s nearly half of a middle schooler’s life… Hmph.”

Tsukihi snorts, and then–

“I know I don’t have to make sure, but just in case.” She crawls over, approaching the bed on all fours to look up at Nadeko, whose eyes are downcast–this way, Nadeko can’t hide her expression. “When you say that you like Koyomi, you don’t mean as a kind and caring big brother or as a friend, right?”

“…”

“You mean you like him in a sexual way, right?”

“S-Sexual…”

“Oops. As a member of the opposite sex, right?”

“Y…Yeah.”

“You don’t want to be in my position or Karen’s, you want to date him or be his lover. That’s what you mean by liking him, right?”

“Y-Yeah… That is.”

“You want to snuggle and cuddle with him, right?”

“i-i do…i think.”

“You want to do this and that.”

“i do…”

i have no choice but to answer this way when she’s grilling Nadeko.

Mister Serpent, on Nadeko’s right wrist–

Doesn’t say or do a thing.

He acts like he’s not there.

i wonder what he thinks about Nadeko and Tsukihi–upon hearing this conversation between two girls in their second year of middle school.

“N-Nadeko…likes Big Brother Koyomi. i like him…as a man.”

“Okay.”

Tsukihi nods, then continues, still staring at Nadeko’s expression from below.

Given the situation, you’d think she’d follow up with something like, *Then you’ve got my support! Don’t worry, I’ll be your go-between!* But wait for it, what she says is almost the complete opposite.

This is Tsukihi after all.

“But you know he has a girlfriend, right?”

016

Nadeko can tell that her pupils are dilating.

And that her face is getting stiff.

She feels the edges of her lips twitching, too–it's not something i can stop, even if i try. It's a physiological reaction.

The wheezing–the motions.

Tsukihi sits there observing all of it.

Something like an eternity seems to pass, but in reality, it must have been a single moment, less than a blink of an eye–in fact, Tsukihi really does blink once before her eyes narrow.

"Huh," she says. "I see. You did know."

"…"

"That's your reaction, clearly. Not surprised, but 'caught out'–well, people like to gossip about Koyomi. It's hard to live normally in this town and not hear about it. Plus, he must have not been hiding it from you unlike with me and Karen."

With that, Tsukihi moves away from her spot below Nadeko and stands up. It looks for a second like she's getting ready to punch Nadeko, but no, Tsukihi opens the door.

i wonder if she's leaving because she feels disgusted by Nadeko, but she just wants to check the hallway.

Glancing back and forth–probably to make sure that Koyomi and Karen aren't anywhere nearby–she closes the door and returns to where she was.

No, not where she was.

Now she's on top of the bed–rising to be eye-to-eye with Nadeko, Tsukihi sits down.

It’s a springy bed, so it feels like the ground shakes–or more like everything, including the ground, wobbles back and forth.

She’s close.

And, i’m, scared.

If you’re thinking that i’m being too afraid of a friend, try sitting there in Nadeko’s place.

“All right then, Nadeko,” Tsukihi says. Looking straight at Nadeko. “Let’s be honest with each other. Woman to woman.”

“…”

Is this situation still going to continue?

Isn’t it about time for Nadeko to go search for Mister Serpent’s object of worship in a new chapter?

i feel like Tsukihi’s favorability rating is plummeting, but…no.

She probably doesn’t care one bit about her favorability–right, unlike Nadeko.

“When did you find out?” she asks.

“Wh-When? Well, um, i…i did hear rumors…b-but before that, beyond that, i see Big Brother Koyomi walking with girls all the time…”

“…”

What’re you doing getting seen like that all the time, Koyomi? i hear Tsukihi mumble.

i sense a little sister’s rage at her big brother’s carelessness.

“And it’s a different girl every time, so i thought they probably weren’t his girlfriends…”

“Koyomi is way too careless…”

“Now that i think about it, i might have also seen him riding on Karen’s shoulders a number of times…”

“A number of times?!”

“S-So i thought maybe they were all like little sisters to him…”

“A guy with that many girls who’re like little sisters to him is somehow way worse than a guy with several girlfriends…”

“But.”

But.

Out of all of them, one–was clearly different.

One of them was different.

Not like a little sister, and of course not like a big sister–

“She matched him and just looked like his lover.”

“Matched him, huh? You’re right–she does,” Tsukihi expresses her agreement. “She’s a good match for him. To the point where she comes across like the only one for him. Everyone might think Koyomi is the only one for her, but it’s actually the other way around.”

“i guess that was around last month… Oh, uh, it’s already November, so…two months ago.”

“Hm. So after we started second term… It took you longer than I expected.”

“…”

“Really? Are you sure you’re not lying to me?”

Tsukihi turns her eyes to glare at Nadeko.

Her sleepy eyes are wide open, and it’s pretty scary.

i can feel the force behind them.

“I’m gonna punch you if you’re lying, okay?”

“i-i’m not…”

“In the lower abdomen.”

“You’re getting even more specific…”

“Hmph. Well, not like it’d mean anything if you lied about it–because my issue with you right now is why you still have a crush on Koyomi knowing he has a girlfriend.”

“Y-You have an issue with Nadeko…”

i scoot back a little.

It feels like she might punch Nadeko if we’re too close.

But Nadeko’s back is up against the wall after scooting, and there’s nowhere to run…

“What, are you saying it’s not an issue?”

“W-Well…it’s not like Nadeko–”

This is a tense conversation. Like one wrong answer could instantly send a fist flying… How did i end up in this situation?

It’s partly because Nadeko’s Mom and Dad found out that she left home, but the biggest reason must be Mister Serpent malfunctioning…

The Serpent continues to stay enwrapped around Nadeko’s right wrist. i almost want to call him Mister Scrunchy instead of Mister Serpent at this point.

“It’s not like Nadeko is ‘skeeming’ to steal him away…and i can’t win him over…and it’s not like i’m hoping that Koyomi and his girlfriend break up, either… i do have feelings of, well…wanting to go out with Koyomi…or i had them, but…if he has a girlfriend, i don’t mean to get in his way… i just want to be near him…that’s all i need to be satisfied…”

“And I have an issue with that!”

Tsukihi smacks Nadeko–or actually doesn’t.

i receive the shouted words like a punch in the head–and flinch.

If Nadeko were a snake, she’d turn tail.

“It’s so obvious that you like him, but it’s not like you want to go out with him? You don’t want to be his lover? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“…”

“You just need to be near him? You’re content just liking him? That sounds great, sure, so chaste and modest and nice, but don’t you feel like you aren’t making any sense at all?”

Tsukihi doesn’t try to keep her tone from getting rough. It looks like she’s seriously mad at Nadeko–but.

Nadeko doesn’t get it.

Why is Tsukihi mad?

And–for Nadeko’s sake?

“In other words, is my brother like an idol in a VCR to you? Is he no different from a manga hero you just admire?”

“…”

The term VCR is really close to being outdated…

“You like him in a sexual…sorry, as a member of the opposite sex, but that’s all you mean?”

“E-Even if you’re right…” Nadeko hesitantly replies to Tsukihi.

Eyes cast down, as always. Mounting a rebuttal as best i can.

“Feelings for idols and heroes don’t have to be weak. You can’t say ‘that’s all’ about them… T-To Nadeko, Big Brother Koyomi is like–”

“That’s not what I mean,” Tsukihi interrupts Nadeko. “I’m saying you’re being *ambiguous.* You claim to have liked him ever since second grade, but you sound so unnaturally sensible about it, until i think about how you invite him over, or wear revealing clothes to seduce him, or sleep in his bed–how assertive you are, pretending he doesn’t have a girlfriend, and still not giving up, instead getting a kick out of making him worry.”

“G-Getting a kick out of…”

True. i totally am.

“If you’ll let me tell you exactly how I feel, then yeah,” Tsukihi leads off, asking if she can.

If i have a choice in the matter, i don’t want her to, but she doesn’t seem eager to “infur” Nadeko’s opinion.

“Nadeko,” Tsukihi just goes ahead. “Are you playing it safe, with a love that will never be requited?”

“…”

“Because if you’re in love with someone, you don’t have to fall in love with anyone else.”

Ideals that are too lofty can ruin people, didn’t Miss Hanekawa say? Tsukihi mutters like it’s not really her problem.

Well, it really isn’t. It’s Nadeko’s problem.

“In that sense, my VCR idol and manga hero analogy are good ones, if I do say so myself. I wasn’t trying to be sarcastic or anything–falling in love with a person you can never reach or a character in a work of fiction means never having to be hurt.” *Like a*

2D complex? Just kidding, Tsukihi assures Nadeko. “It’s so easy to fall in love with someone who’s never going to reject you.”

“Y-You might never get rejected…but idols still get married, and heroes get together with heroines…”

“Yeah.”

Tsukihi casually nods at the argument Nadeko fought to put together. Almost like being proved wrong on that point doesn’t matter one bit.

Well, Tsukihi is right.

Nadeko’s point is no different from a lame question like, *Why didn’t Cinderella’s glass slippers disappear once the magic wore off*?

Because.

In reality–all it does is remind Nadeko of the fact that Big Brother has a girlfriend now.

“Tsu-Tsukihi… i, um, that’s not it. That isn’t what Nadeko’s up to at all…”

“Yeah? But hasn’t your life been a lot easier thanks to being in love with Koyomi?”

“Wh-What do you mean…”

“Come on. When a boy tells you he likes you or whatever, hasn’t turning him down been pretty easy? ‘There’s someone else I like.’”

“…”

Answering with “That’s not true” might put an end to this torturous conversation–if only i could lie, but i can’t.

Nadeko did use that reason to turn down the baseball-club boy during first term–and it wasn’t her first time.

And to be honest, Big Brother Koyomi was the perfect person to bring up to end the discussion–after all, he's known as a dependable older brother to Karen and Tsukihi, of all people.

"Well, don't feel bad. I mean, when I was in elementary school, I turned down boys who confessed to me by telling them that I already loved my big brother."

"…i-i feel like that shut them up for a different reason…"

By the way, i believe there's someone Tsukihi is seeing–an older boy, was it?

Mizudori, or Rosokuzawa…

Which one was with which, again?

i wonder.

This boyfriend of hers, does Tsukihi love him more than she loves Koyomi?

"Don't feel bad, but," Tsukihi completely ignores Nadeko's remark (sad face), "I dunno, you might just need to accept people thinking you're trying to act cute."

"A-Act–"

"Wait, no. It's natural for you, so you're not 'trying to act' that way. The truth, Nadeko, is that you *are cute*."

"…"

"Still, it's not convincing at all when someone you call 'Big Brother' is the guy you're interested in. That's what Rosokuzawa told me–"

So it's Rosokuzawa.

"–And that's why I ended up going out with him."

"Th-That was your reason?"

“That was the reason. It was enough for me–but I feel like maybe you don’t have a good enough reason to be in love with Koyomi? You don’t need one to fall in love–sure, that’s the kind of nice phrase that gets you to nod your head and agree for a second, but it’s not true. Like I said, it doesn’t matter what it is, you need a reason, even if it’s something you come up with later. Even if it’s something only you understand that no one else accepts as valid.”

“Wh-Wha…”

What time is it now?

i sense a lot of sunlight outside, beyond the curtains–but can’t tell the exact hour.

If i go home now, take a shower, eat breakfast, then go to school–will i still make it and not be tardy?

It’s these sorts of things that keep crossing Nadeko’s mind.

“N-N-Nadeko is…”

“That.”

“Huh?”

“Why do you refer to yourself as ‘Nadeko’? You’re not a little girl, and certainly not some manga character–”

i’m blindsided by this fresh piece of criticism from an unexpected direction.

F-First person? We’re talking about points of view now?

“–Is that just another part of your cuteness, Nadeko?”

“Ah, um… Th-That’s not why…”

“Or maybe your psyche is still stuck in second grade? You don’t want to think about the complicated stuff, you just want to be a girl who’s in love with being in love?”

“Th…That might be part of it… B-But Tsukihi. It’s simple, Nadeko doesn’t want to cause any trouble for Big Brother Koyomi…”

“Trouble?”

“Y-Yeah… L-Like i said…the one thing i don’t want to be is a nuisance,” i continue, nodding, realizing that Nadeko isn’t going to be freed if she just stays quiet. She might even get trapped in Koyomi’s room for the rest of her life–though i wouldn’t necessarily hate that. “It’s true, i was shocked when i learned he had a girlfriend… i did cry all night…but Nadeko can’t click off her feelings for him like a switch.”

i drag them along, unable to forget.

“It might look to you like i’m just playing at love…or maybe like i’m being too devoted…but this is normal for Nadeko. i don’t feel guilty–at all.”

“…”

“But Nadeko…doesn’t want to cause trouble for Koyomi. O-Or is that still no good? Is staying in love with him unforgivable?”

i don’t want to cause trouble for him.

Yet almost as strongly–*i don’t want heartbreak.*

Nadeko doesn’t want to lose this love of hers.

“Of course, i can’t even cause him trouble…because there’s no way i could beat–her.”

“If I was a boy–well, even a girl.”

Tsukihi gets off the bed.

i think she must have understood Nadeko when i see this–and feel relieved.

But i’m mistaken.

Tsukihi faces Koyomi's desk–and reaches for its stationery holder.

"Hearing your assertion, Nadeko, people would only think you're *cute.* How endearing, and brave, and cute."

"…"

"Of course I do too. But, you know, I am his little sister."

Tsukihi picks out a certain implement from the holder. Well, *it* isn't anything to tiptoe around, being a pretty standard stationery item.

"And–I was the one to introduce you to my brother. When I think that I'm even a little responsible…I can't sit back and do nothing. To be honest, I'd love to…not leave you alone, but sit back and do nothing…"

"…"

"You know how people buy lottery tickets? Even though they don't expect to win. If you ask them why, though, they'll say they're 'buying a dream'… Every time I hear that, I think–dammit, *just buy reality.*"

"…"

i suddenly recall Mister Serpent comparing his dowsing to the lottery.

"When you tell someone to dream, what you're really doing is telling them to look at reality–I think. If you were actually planning on confessing to Koyomi–if you were planning on fighting her, I was hoping to back you. I wanted to, even. I'd watch over you, at the very least, and quietly cheer you on. That's what I thought all this time, but…I'm done."

I'm sick of it. I'll end it for you, Tsukihi says as she turns around.

The gleaming implement in her right hand, sure enough.

Sure enough–is just a pair of scissors.

“Shink!”

The sound–i feel like it came from somewhere far away.

But it wasn’t far away at all.

It was very, very close.

So frighteningly close that if Tsukihi had miscalculated the distance even a little, Nadeko would have lost her vision in both eyes.

“What…”

Flutter, flutter, flutter.

Nadeko’s just barely unharmed eyes–notice something falling in front of them.

What is that something?

Well, there’s no doubting it, no way of making believe it’s anything else–not even a way of being indirect about it: Nadeko’s bangs.

That *shink.*

It was Tsukihi wielding those scissors–and slicing through Nadeko’s bangs with a single, decisive motion.

“……”

Well.

Sitting in stunned silence isn’t going to move things forward.

So Nadeko will be screaming.

Your attention, please.

One, two…

“AAAA

017

Okay.

An hour has passed since i screamed like a dying demon king pierced through the heart with a legendary sword.

i don't really remember what happened afterwards.

It's vague. It's fuzzy.

It's a total mystery why i'm now staggering toward school.

It's strange that i'm lurching from left to right to right to left, not knowing whether i'm awake or asleep, vision blurred and warped, and heading to middle school.

Why am i still alive?

It's strange.

To escape reality, i try thinking back to the faint memories, and yes, the first flashback is Big Brother running into his room after hearing Nadeko scream and slugging Tsukihi.

Yikes, i think.

A girl getting punched with a closed fist basically right before Nadeko's eyes… The image is so shocking i lose interest in finding fault with Tsukihi for the "atrosity" she committed against Nadeko. Even Solomon wouldn't try to punch his little sister in two.

"Sengokuuuuuuuu! Hang on! Relax, you lost your bangs, that's all!"

He held Nadeko's shoulders and swung her back and forth.

Nadeko lost her bangs, that's all?

Nope.

Isn't that, like, everything?

What's left if you take Nadeko's bangs away from her?

"It looks really weird, but don't worry!"

It looks really weird, but?

It wasn't even an attempt to comfort Nadeko… He was just announcing a fact…

"Karen! Get over here! Take Sengoku somewhere safe! I need to have a talk with this littler little sister of mine right now! No, I have nothing to tell her anymore, but the two of us need to be alone!"

"Heh, heheheh," Tsukihi laughed eerily as she lay under Big Brother's mount.

The way she laughed with blood pouring out of her mouth was so awfully real.

It isn't super-deformed or anything.

"H-How bold, Koyomi. You want us to be alone?"

"Bold is damn right! I'm about to do things to your body that will get censored for teens and Tokyoites! You better be ready!"

"D-Don't go too hard on me…"

"Oh, I'm gonna show you hard!"

A terrible sibling fight was about to break out.

No, Karen forced Nadeko out of the room after coming in like some kind of beast summoned by Big Brother Koyomi, so i don't know if their fight was terrible, or worse…

"Wh-What the hell have you done, Tsukihi… Even I can't defend you on this one…"

Shaking uncharacteristically and streaming a bizarre sweat (not the refreshing kind), Karen brought Nadeko to the first-floor washroom. Then–

“Umm…I want to say that Tsukihi normally uses…”

She took a pair of scissors off of the shelf. These were serrated and for trimming hair, rather than the regular kind for cutting pieces of paper that Tsukihi used.

“We can’t leave you like this, I want to clip it so it looks natural… Is that okay?”

Karen was being considerate.

Karen, who’s supposed to be crude and tactless…

“What’s it like now?” i asked, looking toward the mirror with Nadeko’s unfocused eyes.

In that mirror, i saw–*who?*

That’s what the sight made Nadeko want to ask–a girl with no bangs, whose eyebrows and forehead were out in the open for everyone to see.

The end.

“No way, no way, no way, no way, no way, no way, no way, no way,” Nadeko mutters as she heads toward school–hiding her face with both palms as she walks.

i actually want to wear a hat pulled all the way down… Even a bowler would be fine, but i’d have to take off any hat at school, no matter what kind…

i even feel like taking the day off.

i don’t want to go to school with this hair…

Well, it’s a hairdo i can kind of be seen wearing thanks to Karen’s surprising styling talent… Still, there’s no hiding the imbalance between Nadeko’s bangs and the sides and bottom.

There’s no balancing it without having her hair cut extra short.

Try as she might to hide her face as she walks, it's useless–her small hands can cover her face, but they only reach up to her forehead.

i feel like everyone's laughing at Nadeko.

"No way, no way, no way…"

"No point in trying to run away from reality, my dear Nadeko–hmmmm?"

Then.

i hear a voice coming from Nadeko's face, now unguarded by her bangs–well, it wouldn't from her face, it actually comes from right next to it.

Maybe i should just say from the wrist of her right hand covering the right half of her face.

Yes.

In other words, after all this time, it's Mister Serpent.

"…"

"Hm? What's the matter, Nadeko? Why aren't you reacting?"

"Sh-Shut up," i say.

It's rare for Nadeko to be so rude.

It's a rough tone you shouldn't use toward anyone even if they aren't gods. But it's all too much for Nadeko right now.

"i can't believe you…Mister Serpent."

"You can't believe me? Why not?"

"Y-You didn't save Nadeko…"

"C'mon, don't be ridiculous–what could I have done in that situation? I did exactly what I promised you and stayed quiet until

the very end, didn't I? Far from scolding me, you oughta be praising me, hmmmm?"

"…"

Logically speaking, he's right.

But i'm not talking about logic.

This is about how i feel.

"Either way, what reason do I have to save you? It's pretty high-handed to complain that I didn't, you know. A real self-centered, me-first story, hmmmm?"

"That's true, but…urrrk," Nadeko groans, lowering her right hand.

When Mister Serpent starts going on like this, acting as an aberration and not a scrunchy, he's too close for comfort up against Nadeko's face (to put it in a romantic way, our lips were nearly touching) and it feels hard to talk to him.

But since her hands are already small, it's not like Nadeko can cover her whole face with one hand, and she gives up and puts down her left hand as well.

Well.

i can't play peek-a-boo like this all day, anyway…

No matter how much you peek-a-boo, people can see you.

This bangless girl.

"…"

Ahh, i feel so anxious. It's like i'm walking around buck naked.

No matter how much i look down or away, Nadeko can't hide her face. What is this…immoral sense of freedom?

Does Miss Kanbaru always feel this way?

It’d be amazing if she does. She’d have Nadeko’s respect.

Well, not that Miss Kanbaru is always walking around buck naked.

“Nah, it’s just normal. What immoral sense of freedom…” Mister Serpent teases like he’s read Nadeko’s mind.

i don’t even have the energy to argue back.

Even so.

“i can’t believe you… i can’t believe you, Mister Serpent,” Nadeko says to herself, but still audibly. Repeating the phrase over and over like some kind of plea is Nadeko’s way of putting up a fight.

i’m not putting one up consciously. The best way to describe it is that i’m delirious.

“You’re so mean, Mister Serpent…”

“Mean… Why are you blaming me? This is the flimsiest fit I’ve ever seen, hmmmm? I’m not the one who cut off your serpentine bangs. It was that Tsukihi girl, no?”

“Urrrrr.”

He’s right.

But honestly, Nadeko finds it hard to direct her anger at Tsukihi…and not just because Tsukihi already took some extreme punishment.

“Wh-Why, though… Why would she do this to Nadeko…”

“I don’t think you’re gonna find a reason.”

Mister Serpent sounds like he’s enjoying this.

Although he’s merged with Nadeko, not a scrap of our emotions is linked. He’s not like Miss Shinobu or Miss Black Hanekawa.

But what could he be enjoying about this?

“Basically, Nadeko, you managed to rub her the wrong way when she was bristling.”

“B-Brisslin? Is that some cute anime girl who’s popular now?”

“No, no. It’s not a nickname. Don’t you know that word? It’s as elementary as can be for me–whose scales are always on edge. Yes, bristling. In other words, you made Tsukihi mad.”

“…”

It didn’t seem that way–it didn’t seem like the moody and hysterical Tsukihi’s way of getting mad–still, was she mad?

The result of her anger at Nadeko.

Is that why those scissors flashed?

…

Uh-uh, no matter how mad you are, cutting off another girl’s hair isn’t something you do.

“Tsukihi really is scary…”

“Are you sure? You’re a lot scarier from my perspective,” the Serpent says.

“Why, is that…”

“It’s what I thought when I heard your conversation–*hsshh, hsshh.* I get how Tsukihi feels, a lot better than how you feel. She and I are also pretty close as far as our existences go,” Mister Serpent remarks, not making any sense. “Sure, she’s a bit nastier than I am.”

“Wh…What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. Not a thing. If you have no idea what I’m saying, it means you don’t need to know. Anyway, dear, you haven’t forgotten, have you? You’re gonna search for my object of worship again starting tonight.”

“…”

“Whoa. Don’t tell me you actually did forget.”

“i didn’t…but i don’t want to walk around much with this haircut…even if i can’t do anything about school…”

And you didn’t save Nadeko when she was in trouble, i grumble, but Mister Serpent doesn’t seem to catch it.

Nadeko’s voice was too quiet. Maybe she needs to be a little more forward.

“Um, Mister Serpent? This is just a proposal.”

“Huh? A proposal?”

“i-i hope you’ll listen, it has ‘merrits’ for both of us.”

“Of course I will. You and I are trusting partners, after all.”

Yeah, right…

i won’t say he has a forked tongue, but well, it is a snake’s.

Nadeko speaks up. The proposal benefits both of us.

“Can we stop looking for your object of worship until Nadeko’s hair grows back?”

“…Where exactly in that plan do I come out ahead?!”

“Eek!”

Nadeko flinches and shrinks as Mister Serpent yells at her–well, okay, he has a point.

“Y-You might feel a sense of satisfaction because you did something Nadeko asked you to do.”

“Who do you think you are?” the god retorts.

Just as i expected, he shoots down the proposal.

i let out a deep sigh.

“In that case…i can just wear a hat at night? And sunglasses, and a face mask…”

“What are you, a robber?” The Serpent sounds dumbfounded. “You know, Nadeko, you really are hopeless. Why does it matter what your hair looks like?”

“It…It’s a very important issue for a girl.”

“You’ll be fine. You’re cute enough.”

“!”

i don’t know what Mister Serpent means by this–maybe he’s just trying to put Nadeko at ease, maybe it’s an offhanded remark not even meant to do that.

But those words.

They’re like thorns to Nadeko right now.

Fangs sinking into her.

“i…”

“You?”

“i’m not cute!” i scream.

On the way to school, too–i realize i’m almost there, and it’s among classmates, seniors, juniors, and even teachers that Nadeko screamed.

She instantly shuts her mouth and places her open left hand over her sealed lips before sprinting away–to quickly make it through the gates and beeline to the school building.

“Hey, hey, Nadeko, what’s the matter? Why run off? People are only going to be that much more suspicious. It’s when you slip up that you need to take care to right yourself.”

“U-Urrrr…”

It’s not just because of Mister Serpent’s warning, but i finally stop by the shoe cupboards.

i can’t believe i feel so uncertain without bangs.

It’s not even about being cute or not…

i’m just so uneasy.

Nadeko’s eyes happen to make their way over to the full-body mirror placed diagonally across from the cupboards–and though i already saw it on the way in unexpected reflections and glass angled just the right way.

i see a girl i don’t know. A new character. It has to be an original character for the anime, or maybe even a game version.

There’s no game version, but still.

“See? This girl isn’t cute.”

“*Hsshh hsshh,* but isn’t that exactly what you wanted? You didn’t like it when people were partial to you because you’re cute.”

“It wasn’t…that i didn’t…” But i can’t put together a response.

“It’s just hair. Who cares? You don’t have to do a thing for it to grow back.”

“It won’t… Nadeko is going to be like this for the rest of her life.”

“You know that’s not true… What the hell? That’s not even negative, just stubborn. Instead of spouting that kind of crap, why not take care of your hair and do whatever you can to help it grow faster?”

“Y-Yeah… In that case, Nadeko will do her best to become kinkier!”

“Did you really just say that?”

“i’ll read all the naughty books i can find!”

Apparently, Miss Kanbaru’s hair grows fast because she’s kinky…

Fine, i do get a strong sense that the issue lies somewhere else.

And that’s not what i wanted to say, at all–but what should i say to make Mister Serpent understand the way i feel?

Anyway, i’m in the school building now–i can’t keep talking to him.

We’ll continue this conversation tonight.

Despite what i said, i probably do have to go look for his object of worship… Mister Serpent’s energy might run out if Nadeko waited for her hair to grow back out.

“If.”

“Huh?”

“If you’re really that concerned about your bangs–I could fix them, hmmmm?”

“…”

It comes from nowhere–Mister Serpent offers a real proposal, and it leaves Nadeko speechless.

Huh?

“Y-You can–do that?” i ask back in a whisper.

i do this as i change shoes. So that no one gets suspicious–but i’d be lying if i told you that Nadeko’s fingers weren’t trembling as she took her slippers out of the cupboard.

“I’m a god, you know–it’s my duty to listen to people’s requests. I wasn’t planning on offering anything in exchange, but if you retrieve my object of worship, I suppose I could at least grant your wish of having long bangs again.”

"…"

"Could you not look so excited, dear? I can't have you getting your hopes up too much–to be precise, I can only make your hair grow at a faster speed. I'm not saying I can turn things back to the way they were."

I'm not saying I can turn things back to the way they were–the Serpent repeats in a somewhat suggestive way.

But Nadeko doesn't care what he might be suggesting. There's only one thing that's important, which is Nadeko's hair growing longer.

"Y-You mean…right now?"

"You gotta listen when people are talking to you. Snakes, too. Once you retrieve my object of worship, remember? Isn't it obvious I don't have that kind of power now?"

"Oh."

So he kind of gave Nadeko the slip.

In other words, to get her bangs back, Nadeko needs to "rome" around town at night looking like some unknown, original character after all.

Well, i'm happy there's at least some hope–but i wonder.

He might be lying to Nadeko to make her feel better.

And even if he isn't, even if i blindly believe him like nothing could possibly go wrong, i still don't have any idea where his object of worship is. What's more, i've learned that Mister Serpent's dowsing abilities can malfunction, so the path ahead is very uncertain.

It feels like the situation hasn't improved one bit.

Who knows, maybe Nadeko's bangs are just going to grow back out normally as we try and fail to find Mister Serpent's object of worship…

Seriously, how long is his time limit?

"No, no, Nadeko–that's not an issue."

"Hm?"

That's not? What isn't?

"Wh…What do you mean?"

"We might find it as early as tonight–yes, my object of worship. We'll turn this curse into a blessing, or maybe it's like life handing you lemons and making lemonade–however odd that adage sounds coming from my mouth. Anyway, yesterday's malfunction may have worked in our favor," the Serpent reveals–grinning. No, he's not actually grinning with his face. "While it may have been a disaster for you, the loss of your bangs just might be a lucky break for me. Your sacrifice wasn't in vain."

"…"

Please don't sacrifice Nadeko's bangs.

It doesn't make her feel any better.

"But…what do you mean?"

"*Hsshh, hsshh, hsshh.* Maybe it's no more than every cloud having a silver lining for you–but at the very least, they're wrong about the ways of heaven being inscrutable."

"…"

i don't really understand the fine differences between all these expressions.

Aren't they all just saying the same thing?

“Basically, Koyomi taking you in his care has given me an idea of where my object of worship is–though naturally I won’t claim to be certain.”

“R-Really? Then…”

Nadeko’s hunt for this object of worship could end as soon as today–in that case, you might really say there’s a “silver lining” to what happened last night.

A worthwhile sacrifice…it wasn’t by any means, but i do feel like i’m at least being repaid in some small way.

Then again, i also remember feeling the same way last night. i can’t be all smiles yet…

“S-So, Mister Serpent. You have an idea?”

“I think I’ll tell you tonight–we can’t go searching until then, and it’s going to be a bit of a surprising location for you. You want to be able to concentrate on your classes.”

“…”

i wouldn’t mind taking a day off if he’s absolutely certain where it is…but this is a promise that i insisted on. i’d be ashamed to back down from it.

The thing is, Nadeko doesn’t want to have to sit through her classes with this hair… That makes it feel all the more like she would be cheating, and she feels guilty.

“A surprising location for Nadeko… So, somewhere Nadeko knows?”

“It would mean that, yes.”

“Was there something like a hint in Nadeko’s conversations yesterday with Big Brother…or Miss Shinobu, or Tsukihi? Something–that rang a bell for you, Mister Serpent?”

It would mean that. But Mister Serpent doesn't give a clear yes or no. "Well, I suppose it would mean that–it doesn't *not* mean that," he answers vaguely.

The way he puts it makes Nadeko grow uneasy. "Um, Mister Serpent… If you're going to call Nadeko your partner, i'd like you to just tell Nadeko instead of 'consealing' it…because it's going to be Nadeko who has to do the actual searching…"

"Oh, no, don't you worry. I'm not trying to put on airs or anything–and I'm not plotting anything, either. I'm just trying to choose the best way to do this."

"But–"

"And anyway, aren't there other things you ought to be thinking about and solving, hmmmm?"

"…"

Well, true.

Like why Tsukihi suddenly cut Nadeko's hair–according to Mister Serpent, it's because i rubbed her the wrong way when she was brissling, but…

Tsukihi can get mad on other people's behalf.

Maybe she's just carrying on the ideals of Big Brother Koyomi, who hustles for other people's sake…but what i can't figure out is why her rage led to that result.

Maybe i'm just going to have to ask her…

It also feels pointless to ask her…

Also, considering the sentence Big Brother must have exacted on her afterwards, i can't go near the Araragi residence carelessly.

i even want to hold off on phone calls.

“Yeah, i do need to think about it… The ordinary thinking would be that she was breaking Nadeko’s heart by force by cutting her hair, but that seems too shortsighted.”

“Isn’t that the right answer? So you do get it, Nadeko. Bingo–but if you find it shortsighted, I guess you need to think more long-term. Not just about why she cut your hair, but why you still refer to yourself by your name.”

Mister Serpent sounds appalled.

His words confuse Nadeko.

Think long-term? Does he mean–all the time?

Always?

“Give me a break… Thinking all the time…would be so *tiresome*–” Nadeko starts to say without thinking, but she’s interrupted.

“Oh. I’ll be quiet.”

Nadeko doesn’t even have the time to wonder why, because at the same moment–

“Sengoku,” she hears from behind, as someone places a hand on her shoulder.

i don’t feel repulsed since it’s over Nadeko’s clothes, but it sure does surprise her.

When i look behind with a jolt, it’s Nadeko’s homeroom teacher, Mister Sasayabu.

i was so absorbed by our conversation i completely forgot i was already at school–so once again.

Once again Nadeko feels tense.

Mister Sasayabu must not have heard the conversation since Mister Serpent noticed him first and went quiet–

Thinking so, i check him out.

“Hm, hmm?” His expression is so totally suspicious.

i wonder if he noticed something, but i’m wrong–Mister Sasayabu isn’t surprised about anything to do with Mister Serpent. It’s Nadeko’s hairstyle.

He probably couldn’t tell from behind, but unlike until just yesterday, Nadeko has no bangs–so of course he’d be surprised.

“I-I must have the wrong person… Sorry.”

“Oh, no, i’m Sengoku.”

Mister Sasayabu tries to leave, flustered, but Nadeko stops him–there’s no need to, if i think about it with a cooler head, but i do it without thinking, reflexively.

“i’m Nadeko Sengoku.”

“Sengoku… So that’s your true form…”

What a brutal line.

Then again, Nadeko thinks the same thing about herself.

Still, i don’t want people thinking it’s the real Nadeko… i don’t intend for a version of Nadeko with a weird hairstyle, short only in front, to be her true form.

Mister Sasayabu clears his throat, cheesily.

“Are you being bullied?” he asks.

…That’s what it looks like?

From a teacher’s perspective, this unique hairstyle looks like the result of Nadeko’s heartless persecution by her peers–you know what? Ultimately, you could say so.

While we go to different schools, Tsukihi is absolutely a girl Nadeko’s age.

“…”

Nadeko falls silent and shakes her head.

Denying it by saying “i’m not being bullied” might backfire, like i’m really trying to deny it.

Nadeko’s plan seems to work, and Mister Sasayabu seems convinced.

“Okay, then.”

While he’s relieved, he also looks a little disappointed–and i know how he feels.

There’d be a course of action he could take as a teacher for a big, blatant issue like bullying–at least, we’d be able to move on from the current state of our class.

Teachers are pros, too. If there’s a problem, they can take care of it. But.

While they can enforce something like “not fighting.”

They can’t enforce “getting along with each other.”

Which is why i can see why things getting worse might seem like an improvement.

…Still, he’d be nothing but a pest if he said, *If only you were being bullied, Sengoku.*

Give Nadeko a break.

“By the way, Sengoku. About what I asked you to do the other day–any new developments?” he asks, changing the topic.

Well, maybe he thinks that’s what he did, but it doesn’t feel that way to Nadeko who’s listening–that aside.

It seems to be why he wanted to talk to Nadeko–i’m glad that he didn’t overhear her conversation with Mister Serpent.

Even if she's really tired mentally, even if she's beyond exhaustion and on the verge of death, Nadeko needs to stay a little more focused, she thinks to herself. At the same time, she also can't believe Mister Sasayabu.

While i know it's not good at all to feel this way about an adult, especially your homeroom teacher, i can't suppress the feeling.

i mean, he only asked the other day.

This has been dragging on with no signs of any solution since the start of second term and is basically entrenched–such a problem, or lack of a problem, can't be settled in a few days.

If you want to be malicious, you might almost arrive at the groundless suspicion that he sees it as part of his routine work–in other words, checking in about it every time he sees Nadeko Sengoku, regardless of the time or place. And that he's preparing an excuse, or building an alibi, about doing his job as a homeroom teacher…

A nasty way to look at it?

But Nadeko isn't particularly good-natured, so she can't help but think so.

Furthermore.

Regardless of what Mister Sasayabu really thinks–that's probably what Nadeko would do in his place, she believes.

"…"

Well, all of these things might be going through Nadeko's mind, but she's not going to say them to his face.

Not a chance. Nadeko just goes silent and looks down like always–she's going to wait for Mister Sasayabu to give up and leave.

No matter what his intentions, whether or not it's just been a few days, Nadeko hasn't done anything. There aren't going to be any new developments.

Everything is still on standby.

"…?"

But today, Nadeko's usual way isn't working–Mister Sasayabu seems to be oddly persistent and is waiting for a reply from her.

Why might that be?

Has something changed between yesterday and today? Nadeko finds it odd, but then she comes upon the reason in no time.

What changed between yesterday and today.

Nadeko's hairstyle, of course.

She can look down all she wants, but he can still see her whole face–and if he can see Nadeko's expression, he can figure out that she's *not as troubled as she says.*

What an awful effect of the haircut.

i didn't expect this.

Nadeko's gloom factor has decreased now that her bangs are gone…

There's nothing i can do about it.

It's not like Nadeko can cover her face at this point… i just need to come up with a convincing excuse and get out of here.

What should i say, though?

i'm sorry, i'm now proactively investigating, identifying challenges, devising an action plan, preparing approaches from a variety of directions, and holding brainstorming sessions each night–or something?

No, no. Nothing like that.

i just need to give a normal excuse.

i'll start with the usual.

i'll start with "i'm sorry" the way i always do, bangs or no. The rest i can make up as–

"Shut the fuck up!"

Hm?

Did someone just say something?

"Of course I haven't made any progress, stop forcing your damn work on me, hmmmm?!"

018

But it wasn't Nadeko's voice, the words came from a male student who dashingly appeared behind her from nowhere–that was the kind of twist i expected, yet no, it was Nadeko's honest-to-goodness voice.

Air was expelled from Nadeko's lungs.

It passed through Nadeko's vocal cords.

And it turned into a voice emitted by Nadeko's oral cavity.

But–Nadeko didn't intend any of that.

"Asking someone how's that thing going, how's that thing going every single time you happen to see her–how do you think it's going?! Nothing's going anywhere! You're supposed to be a homeroom teacher, so instead of depressing your students first thing in the day, can't you at least lead off with a good morning?!"

"…"

Mister Sasayabu is stunned silent.

So is everyone else–they all look at Nadeko from a distance with the same expression.

i mean, Nadeko would like to wear the same expression if she could–and watch Miss Sengoku from afar, but i can see in the mirror behind Mister Sasayabu that her face is burning with a savage rage.

Her teeth are gritted, her brows are raised high, her eyes are bloodshot–and she's glaring at everything around her.

This is really a girl i'm seeing for the first time–and i'm not talking about Nadeko's hairstyle–but.

It's still unmistakably Nadeko Sengoku.

It's unmistakably–*me.*

“Feeling like you can say whatever the hell you want to someone just because they’re nodding quietly back at you–what’re you feeling so disappointed for when you know better than anyone else just how ridiculous the request is?! Is that your job, to be unreasonable to kids?! How the hell do you think a kid’s going to solve something that an adult can’t, hmmmm?!”

“S-Sengoku… Wh-What’s wrong with you?” a confused Mister Sasayabu asks, and Nadeko responds by stomping her foot.

Wham!

As if she’s going to put a crack in the hallway.

It’s not just her mouth, it’s not just her expression, it’s Nadeko’s whole body–that’s moving on its own against her will.

Against her will?

Is that really true, though?

“What the hell do you think’s wrong?! Who wouldn’t get mad if they’re constantly being asked to do the impossible?! You should expect this, it’s normal–hmmmm?!”

i yell.

i scream with a foul, aggressive voice.

Not exactly at Mister Sasayabu–but at everything.

With every bit of bitterness and hate i can muster.

Right at them–looking Nadeko’s targets in their eyes.

i yell.

“Give me a fucking break, civil servant! You could at least take care of some kids instead of feeling good about doing a half-assed job! Stop leaving everything up to other people! You say you’re respecting your students’ autonomy? Yeah right, like people have

autonomy! Look after them like you're supposed to, take care of them!"

"S-Sengoku…"

What is Nadeko saying?

She's not making any sense. No, honestly, i'd like to be dumbstruck right there next to Mister Sasayabu.

i'd like to react in the exact same way as him.

This isn't Nadeko talking, it's Naughtyko–no.

It really is Nadeko–her and no one else.

It's clearly Nadeko.

You can tell at a glance that it's Nadeko.

This is–*me.*

This is "who *I* am."

"Wh-What's wrong, Sengoku…"

Despite being confused, Mister Sasayabu still keeps talking to Nadeko–putting his hand on her shoulder like he's trying to pacify her–

"Don't touch me like we're friends or something!"

Nadeko brushes his hand aside.

Nadeko isn't willing this to happen, of course–but it is Nadeko's body that does the brushing.

It is Nadeko's arms that flail around.

"Is that how you treat people–like they're puppets or something?! Hah… I know that all I am is cute, that I don't even talk back! But it doesn't mean I don't have feelings! You'd better not think people who act harmless really are harmless! Just because

someone’s quiet, that doesn’t mean they’re not thinking all kinds of things on the inside! People still have opinions even if they’re silent! If you’re so stupid that you don’t even understand that, how can you teach anyone anything?!”

“S-Sengoku…”

What verbal abuse.

It isn’t at all how you should speak to your homeroom teacher–actually, it’s not how you should speak to any adult, whether or not it’s your teacher, homeroom or any other kind.

“H-Hey, Sengoku? What’s wrong?” a voice calls from across the hallway… It’s a boy, someone i believe was in Nadeko’s class last school year.

i’ve forgotten his name, but i remember he was caring–it seems like he was just passing by when he happened to run into this mess, and he can’t hide his confusion.

“Y-You need to calm down. Yeah, just calm down. You’re tired, that’s what.”

Looking around, i can see that a huge crowd has gathered to watch–it feels like i’m in front of an audience of a hundred thousand.

Of course, it’s twenty or so in reality.

Being subjected to that many stares, and curious, prying stares at that–Nadeko feels like her spirit is about to break.

You might say they’re the eyes you turn on a “pitiful girl”–but maybe it’s even worse in this case.

Right.

They’re the eyes you turn on a “funny girl.”

But i can't escape these curious stares–Nadeko doesn't have any bangs to protect her now, and most of all, she's facing straight ahead.

Not facing down, not lowering her eyes–

She's staring right back at all of them.

"Calm down?! All of this is happening because I was staying calm! I'm tired?! Of course I am, anyone can see that! Stop acting like you're being thoughtful when all you're doing is stating the obvious!"

Nadeko is baring her fangs at this boy who was probably just worried for her, like normal–i've gone berserk.

No, but.

Most likely, this isn't taking out her anger on just anything–it's everything.

Everything in this school–is the target of Nadeko Sengoku's anger.

She's angry.

Nadeko is angry.

"Every one of you, every last one of you–hmmmm?! You're just a bunch of opportunistic fencesitters! What are you, weathercocks? The way you face this way and that, turning around and around and around… Cut the crap already!"

"S-Sengoku… That's not at all what I was thinking when I assigned you the task," Mister Sasayabu tries to soothe Nadeko, in a tone like he's handling something sensitive…no, fragile–you could say he's flustered.

It does seem like the textbook way to deal with a gloomy, mild-mannered student who's snapped…but.

When i think back, it feels like he's always been treating Nadeko in this way.

Like he's handling something delicate. Like he's cleaning up broken glass.

With distant words–that don't approach her past a certain radius.

Whatever he tells her–is so far away.

They don't resonate or reach Nadeko's heart.

"Your teacher just believed that you're responsible, and–"

"Me, responsible?! Just how awful of a judge of character are you?! Can't you at least figure out how bad of a person Nadeko Sengoku is?! C'mon, stop letting looks deceive you! That's right, all I am is cute!"

What the hell are you doing believing in me?! screams Nadeko.

Rejecting herself–wholesale.

"…S-Sengoku."

"Oh, fine, I get it–you won't understand no matter what I say, not any of you! It's a done deal, I can do all this screaming, I can bare my damn soul and all you're going to think is that 'she acted a little crazy for a spell'–give me a break! Listen here, I went crazy a long-ass time ago!"

Hmmmm?!

Nadeko coats her words with as much venom as possible–before starting to walk off.

Toward Mister Sasayabu–no.

He braces like he's expecting Nadeko to put her hands on him, but she practically elbows him out of her way to head further inside the building.

“Wh-Where are you going…Sengoku?”

“Hmmmm?!” Nadeko answers his bewildered question without even bothering to look back. “Where the hell else? I just have to do my job as class president, don’t I–your damn orders! You oughta be happy, dumbass!”

H-Hold on, wait a second.

What are you up to, Nadeko?

While i’m more perplexed than Mister Sasayabu or anyone else, i don’t see any bewilderment when i notice Nadeko reflected in a mirror she passes by, just aggravation–and i stomp straight toward Nadeko’s classroom.

Year 2, Class 2’s.

A class that’s fallen apart and is free of problems.

Every bit of Nadeko’s will now tries to halt her feet, her body, but they show no signs of stopping whatsoever–it really feels like i’m a puppet.

A marionette.

But in that case, who’s manipulating Nadeko now? And is it her body or her mind that’s being manipulated?

As soon as Nadeko climbs the stairs and arrives in front of her classroom, she peeks inside through the small window on its door.

It’s an oddly discreet thing to do, given all her rough words and actions–almost all of her classmates are gathered there.

Is that what she’s checking to see?

But what Nadeko does next is what really surprises Nadeko… i know this all sounds confusing, but please understand. i apologize, but Nadeko isn’t in a psychological state where she can give a proper

explanation. She's not in a physical state to, either–and Nadeko kicks the door.

Kicks it down. Kicks it down?

"!!"

To describe the kick, it's similar to a technique Karen often uses, a bold, brash, and fearless rolling savate with her legs wide open–the single strike, carrying all her weight, blows the sliding door off its rails and into the class.

Nadeko's body should have close to zero athletic ability. i never imagined it held this much energy–the door slams straight into the teacher's desk and makes a loud noise.

All the students in class turn to look–first at the teacher's desk and the smashed door, then at Nadeko Sengoku as she swaggers in.

Nadeko feels like she's pale and mortified, but there must be rage on her face. The imbalance is confusing.

On the other hand, i've figured out something.

Why Nadeko peeked into the classroom before entering–well, before kicking down the door.

She was checking to see that no students were near the door–in other words, she was making sure no fragments from it would hit anyone when she kicked it down.

This, at the very least, is a relief.

Because while she might seem hotblooded and furious, her actions are calculated and coolheaded–therefore, she might not actually do anything too crazy.

Thank goodness.

Nadeko did just say some awful, abusive things to her homeroom teacher and her old classmate, but apparently she still has some consideration left for her fellow students.

Sure, her grand entry might have been excessive, but at this rate, maybe she won't say anything too awful to everyone.

Nadeko strides toward the teacher's desk.

And then she faces her class.

"Listen up, you maggots!"

i expected wrong.

This isn't even verbal abuse. i don't want to have to categorize it as language. What kind of a greeting is that?

Everyone in class is staring.

The first thing their eyes ask is, "Who the hell is that?"… Of course, it doesn't take long for them to "dissern" that Nadeko is Nadeko. Really, it's just that her bangs are gone…so it can't be too hard to figure out after a close look.

Also, Nadeko's voice is still the same.

No matter how rough–it may sound now.

"C'mon, you maggots! Speak up!"

Please stop…

Stop… Free Nadeko…

If Nadeko could move her hands the way she wanted, the first thing she would do is put her head in them, not use them to cover her face–but what she does in reality is to slam them on the teacher's desk.

There’s so much force that i think the desk might break too–it doesn’t, of course, but i do feel like i took a few years off of its life-span.

No one tries to speak up, of course.

They’re staring blankly.

“Listen up, all of you. *You need to face reality!*”

Nadeko doesn’t care–and screams at them.

Yes, it can only be described as a scream. Of anger, piercing–uncontrollable.

“Look at you, letting your precious youth rot away mired in what’s already said and done–do you have any idea just how much of a waste that is?! It’s totally normal that you can’t trust anyone around you, so stop acting butt-hurt about it! You’re way too sensitive–hmmmm?!”

i pile it on–beating the teacher’s desk again and again as hard as i can.

Like it’s Nadeko’s sworn enemy.

Like it symbolizes everyone in the room now.

Nadeko beats the teacher’s desk–the class.

“Are you only able to make friends with cute and pretty and beautiful people?! Are you only able to like people who already like you back?! If you only want to be around saints, you’d better be ready to be alone for your entire life! If someone you consider a friend gets jealous of you, are you gonna stop being their friend?! Are you gonna cut them out of your life if they lie to you?! Is it goodbye if they do something unforgivable to you?! People think all kinds of things all the time, it’s what they do–but are all of you a bunch of massive idiots who don’t have a single thought going through your heads?! This is going to go on forever unless you figure

out how to cope with it! Are you really gonna be happy that you spent your second year of middle school this way?! Maybe you're thinking that if you ride this out until April you'll be in a new class then, but I'm sorry to tell you that memories are forever! You're going to remember it forever, when you're in high school, when you're in college, when you become adults, even when you start working! You're never gonna be able to forget this absolutely inconceivable middle school class! It'll probably be your most powerful memory! So you need to repaint it, you need to rewrite it, what you need to remember is that no one trusted each other in class for a while because of some strange charms, but that everyone made up in the end!"

Everyone is stunned silent–as they inch backwards.

Part of it is obviously that they don't know how to respond to Nadeko's unusual behavior. They can't react consciously, but their bodies are moving on their own to distance themselves from Nadeko.

Of course they are.

Nadeko would be the same way.

If a girl i don't know very well in class who barely ever talks suddenly showed up at school one day spouting all of this nonsense–nonsense?

Suddenly? Is that right?

It somehow feels wrong.

i mean–ever since Nadeko became class president–she's been thinking the things she just said the whole time.

Mister Sasayabu didn't have to tell her.

…She just never did anything.

She didn't do anything, even when he told her.

She didn't bother doing a thing.

Because–well.

It'd be such a pain.

And it would just be so *tiring*–

"I'd like to tell all of you to go off and die, but I don't even need to bother saying that since you're all as good as dead. Do you understand that, hmmmm? God, I can't believe it–especially the way you took advantage of how well-behaved I am to stick me with a role like class president. Talk about digging your own grave! It's times like this when one of you needs to step up and take charge! What the hell do you think I can do?!"

i can't believe just how defiant i'm acting.

You could say i'm letting it all hang out.

But i'm exactly right.

Making Nadeko class president could only make things worse–Nadeko-like.

A girl who doesn't do a thing.

Who wants to stay a victim.

"You know what, you really are the worst! A bunch of two-faced hypocrites! You get jealous of your friends, turn on the people you like without a second thought, gossip about everyone you hate, and yet suck up and fawn over them, slap on a fake smile so you never have to confront anyone, and stab them in the back once they believe you! You are the scum of the world! The lowest, most base creatures on Earth! But–"

But there was also something real somewhere in there!

Even those lies might have been real, right?!

Nadeko says–screaming.

No, maybe it's the one thing that she didn't scream.

It wasn't a scream. There was no anger.

It may have been a cry.

Nadeko crying out–from her heart.

It might have been a prayer.

"What's the big problem, just go ahead and forgive each other already! Sure, you all hurt each other, but it was only feelings that ended up getting hurt, right? It's not like anyone died! You'll actually end up looking pretty cool if you can forgive each other here!"

With that, like she can't take it any longer–Nadeko even kicks the teacher's desk.

This too, probably–she does after ensuring that everyone got away from it.

"All you liars, traitors, and frauds! Come on and grow hearts big enough to forgive hypocrisy–hmmmm?! Since when did any of you get so important that you're able to pick and choose the people around you? You think you can base your social circles on your likes and dislikes?!"

And then–Nadeko says one last thing.

She cries out, "I hate every single one of you! But goddammit, you're my classmates!"

019

i leave school early. Yes indeed.

While you might say that it's too late to leave early, i can't stand being there any longer and run out.

i'm still in my school slippers, but it doesn't bother Nadeko.

i don't even have the energy to cover my face.

i'm walking absentmindedly.

Even more absentmindedly than on the way to school.

Thinking back on it now, what a great time i had heading to school.

The happiest i've ever been.

Yes, on a stairway to heaven.

What was Nadeko even worried about back then?

"Hey, Nadeko," i hear from Nadeko's right wrist.

It's Mister Serpent.

Ah, Mister Serpent. How long has it been? So he's still here.

"You okay? You seem exhausted. Aren't you on one of those roads for cars right now and not a sidewalk?"

"What? Did you call Nadeko's name?" i ask, still dazed.

Nadeko's eyes are spinning, but of course she can at least give an answer.

Nadeko's got it together, you see.

"What could you possibly want from someone whose life is over?"

“Come on… You know your life isn’t over… But your eyes are scaring me. They’re way too empty. Like caverns or something. I thought you might not have anything there for a second. I’d crawl into those holes if I was a snake.”

“Urr…”

Nadeko’s shoulders slump.

i mean, i feel like everything is slumping, not just her shoulders. In fact, it feels like Nadeko herself has gone as low as she can go.

The self-image that she built for all these years is ruined…all crumbled away.

“It’s not like you wanted to build that image, right? I don’t get why you’re feeling so down.”

“Heheheheh.”

“Agh! What’re you laughing about?”

“…”

Nadeko has to laugh.

What i really want to do is weep, but when things get too painful, you can’t even shed tears.

“N-Nadeko…can forget about wedding dresses now.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Correction… Can forget about school uniforms now.”

Still, i do follow Mister Serpent’s advice and get back on the sidewalk, modifying the course that at some point led Nadeko into the street.

People might even think it was suicide if i got hit by a car.

Nadeko is surprised at how “gluttenous” she is, though, the way she still tries to stay alive.

“i-i’m not going back to school… Nadeko’s going to become a shut-in starting tomorrow…”

“What’s the matter? It felt great to blow up on everyone! That creepy teacher of yours, your classmates, you shut them all up!”

“Th…That’s… Everyone was…just shocked… Shocked at how ridiculous Nadeko was.”

Reminded of it by Mister Serpent, Nadeko thinks back to what happened and the way everyone looked, and a headache even more intense than her dizziness assaults her.

“Everyone was looking at Nadeko like she was trying and failing to sound cool. They were all just feeling super awkward…”

“Trying and failing to sound cool…”

“There’s no worse way to fail… By the end they weren’t even looking at Nadeko like she’s a pitiful girl. i was a painful girl, someone not even worth pitying…”

Really painful. Super painful.

Marquis de Sadeko.

“Trust me, it’s fine. It’s not that bad.”

“It is… And the fact that no one is coming after Nadeko is proof…”

“Do you want someone to come after you?”

“No, but…”

“So what do you want?”

i’m on unstable footing, emotionally and in every other way.

i don’t know where i’m headed–no, really, where is Nadeko walking to right now?

Her body is back to doing what she tells it, but…Nadeko isn't in any place to tell it anything.

"Actually, dear. I'm sure you already know, but just to be sure." The Serpent sounds fed up with Nadeko, like he, too, is shocked by how ridiculous she is. "I wasn't controlling your body back there to go around and say whatever I felt like, you know–I don't want you getting the wrong idea."

"…"

"I guess the effects of merging with me simply showed up in a very pronounced way–the shackles you normally have on yourself were removed. There was nothing unusual about it. Your usual thoughts and feelings just came pouring out of you in a normal way–"

Usual. Normal.

"i know. Shut up already," Nadeko says.

…i went and told him to shut up.

When an "i know" would have been enough.

But i have to lash out.

"That was Nadeko… It was Nadeko Sengoku and no one else. Nadeko herself… Nadeko said what she wanted to say, i know. You didn't do anything wrong, Mister Serpent…"

"Yep, that's right–as long as you know."

"But i do think it's your fault."

"…"

The fact that Mister Serpent is enwrapped around Nadeko's right wrist and merged with her–the fact that he's sucking energy from Nadeko has to mean that he's having some kind of effect on her body and mind.

In other words, what happened was a manifestation of those effects–though of course, Nadeko not being all there after Tsukihi cut her hair must have played some part…

i said what i wanted to say.

It wasn't Mister Serpent, it was Nadeko.

The things building up inside her guts–the stuff that would have stayed there while i went through the months and graduated.

My impulses took over and i let it all come out, that's all.

Horribly enough–that funny, painful–and yes, pitiful girl was Nadeko Sengoku and no one else.

The high-handedness. The incoherence.

It was all Nadeko Sengoku.

But.

"Well… Since it looks like Nadeko's life both in and out of school has come to an end…"

Phew, i sigh as i try to switch topics.

The topic doesn't change, of course, but i guess now that i don't have my bangs, i'm forced to look at what's ahead.

i'm facing forward, even if it's only in what i say.

"While we're at it, why don't we end it all, Mister Serpent?"

"Hunh?"

"You already have an idea of where your object of worship is, don't you? So let's go find it now instead of waiting for nighttime. The sooner the better for you too, right?"

"Oh, well, why not… It's not like I have to sleep or anything."

“Yeah. So let’s hurry up and do this. We’ll find your object of worship, you’ll get your true power back, and then,” Nadeko says, without any particular sentiment, “we’ll part ways.”

“…”

“And it’ll all be over then–okay?”

What comes after that…isn’t something i’m able to think about.

Nothing comes to mind.

What i do know, though, is now that so many things have come to an end, i want to go through and put an end to whatever needs to be finished.

“Yeah, sure,” Mister Serpent nods.

He sounds solemn–for the first time in a while.

“That’s exactly what I want. No objections. No more subjection, either–so long as I get my body back, that’s all that matters. It’s not like I have any interest in your life, Nadeko. What you do after this is none of my concern.”

“…Right.”

i don’t even feel like arguing with him. It’d be silly.

And anyway, i feel the same way–it’s not like Nadeko is interested in what Mister Serpent is going to do after this.

Nadeko isn’t searching for Mister Serpent for Mister Serpent’s sake–it’s for her sake and hers alone.

To make amends. To atone.

She just wants to feel better about herself.

That’s all this is for. So.

“Okay… Then tell me, Mister Serpent. Where does Nadeko need to go, and where does she need to search?”

The Serpent replies immediately to Nadeko's questions for ending it all.

In other words, he must feel determined, too–ready to end it all.

"Big Brother Koyomi's home."

But what the Serpent's determination meant–was something Nadeko wouldn't learn until a little later.

That offhanded answer.

It doesn't surprise Nadeko too much.

"That's where it can all end."

020

Both of Big Brother Koyomi's parents work.

i've asked before what they do, but both he and Tsukihi just gave a vague answer, like "Well, they're civil servants. Yeah, civil servants."

Their stories were completely straight.

It's kind of suspicious.

There must be more going on behind the scenes.

i secretly wonder if they're involved in some shady line of work.

But whether or not there's anything behind the scenes or in the shade, i do at least know that they don't work from home and aren't there in the afternoon–which is also when Koyomi, Tsukihi, and Karen are at school, obviously.

Then again, there's no guarantee any of the three siblings are out given their surprising tendency to skip school, but if they're skipping, they should be somewhere saving people or something. So either way, they shouldn't be home.

In other words, the Araragi residence is empty in the afternoon.

Completely empty.

So if i'm going to sneak in, afternoons would be much better than nights.

"*Hsshh, hsshh*–you know, they do say that afternoon burglaries are more common than nighttime ones. And you know what else they say? Leaving your door unlocked or your windows open makes it harder for robbers to come into your home. Not because you're appealing to their sense of kindness, but because it actually makes them think someone's home."

“…”

Nadeko doesn’t even nod in response to the Serpent’s words–how could i to a piece of knowledge he pulled out from Nadeko to present to Nadeko?

What follows, though, is Mister Serpent’s opinion rather than any knowledge.

“I wonder if you aren’t the same way–getting people around you to protect you by making a show of being defenseless and harmless. Of course in your case–someone really is home.”

“Can we please stop having these meaningless conversations, Mister Serpent?”

“Hmmmm?”

“Nothing’s going to come from talking like this. All that’s left to do is search Big Brother’s home to find your corpse… We can do that fine without opening our mouths.”

i notice that i said “corpse” and not “object of worship,” but i don’t even feel like resaying it. Nadeko just looks up at what’s in front of her–the empty Araragi residence.

So, how should i break in?

“And anyway…are you sure, Mister Serpent?”

“Huh? About what?”

“About your cor…object of worship being inside Koyomi’s home. Are you really sure this isn’t another malfunction?”

Nadeko voices her doubts, and i think anyone would after the chain of events that took place yesterday as a result of Mister Serpent malfunctioning.

It’s not even just in case.

“No, no, like I said, something came out of that malfunction–in fact, you could say this is going exactly as planned. Koyomi found you thanks to it, and you were able to get into his home, which is when I noticed where my object of worship is.”

“But…you didn’t do anything in Big Brother’s room, not even malfunction.”

“I was doing everything I could to hold myself back. You know I can’t start vibrating in front of other people–that’s why I was silent the whole time we were in that room.”

“…”

So it wasn’t just because we were around other people–true, Mister Serpent didn’t talk even when we were alone in the room after Miss Shinobu led (hauled) Big Brother out of it.

i guess he was spending energy then?

“Oh… Is that why you didn’t try to save Nadeko from Tsukihi’s scissors?”

“Well, that’s not something I could do anyway.”

“Still…how strange. Why is your object of worship in Big Brother’s room?”

It is strange.

As far as i know, collecting “anteeks” isn’t one of his hobbies…

“Did Koyomi or his family take your object of worship from the shrine?”

“No, I doubt that’s what happened–the timeline doesn’t match up. Probably, my object of worship was taken somewhere, and someone found it before I could…and entrusted it to Koyomi.”

Right, Big Brother seemed not to know about that shrine being there–and neither did Nadeko until she looked into ways to get rid of the “charm” placed on her.

“But entrusted… By who?”

“Beats me–probably some Hawaiian-shirted expert?”

“…”

Despite Mister Serpent’s incurious and offhanded delivery, he sounds pretty sure.

But wait, an expert who wears Hawaiian shirts…

Isn’t there only one person in Japan like that?

“Whatever the case, though, there’s no guarantee. Who knows, I could be malfunctioning again. Just hurry up and get in there to take a look around, Nadeko.”

“Could you please not sound so casual about it?”

Hearing that is disheartening.

The thing is actually indoors… He’s been using words like “burglary” and “robbers,” and that describes exactly what Nadeko is about to try and do.

The sensible thing to do would be to ask Koyomi or Tsukihi and get permission to come inside, but…Koyomi is always with Miss Shinobu, and Tsukihi is just scary, even if you don’t count what just happened… The fact is, it’s hard to ask either of them. Explaining why would be hard, too.

So Nadeko’s only option is this sham burglary.

No, i really am trying to take something from inside the house. It’s pure burglary.

“Okay! Nadeko will do her best.”

i'd look suspicious loitering outside for too long (Nadeko is still in a school uniform so the police could easily come pick her up). Making up her mind, Nadeko opens the gate to the Araragi residence and enters the premises.

Boldly.

Like i live there.

…i can't believe that Nadeko, who's "dedicaited" her entire life to being quiet and out of sight, is doing such a thing… Can i thank Tsukihi cutting Nadeko's bangs for this, too?

i don't know. Nadeko doesn't know herself anymore.

"…"

But the wind is suddenly taken out of Nadeko's sails when she discovers that the front door is locked after all.

Double-locked, at that.

It seems kind of like a new door, though i didn't notice yesterday because of how dark it was–could they have remodeled recently?

"What to do, Mister Serpent…"

"Feh… Remodeled, remade, it doesn't matter to me–nice try, but you can't keep out a god."

"Huh…"

What, is he going to use his aberrational powers to blow down the door the way Nadeko did at school with a rolling savate? i'd rather not do something that would just lead to more trouble down the line…

Speaking of which, they say that vampires and ghosts and stuff can't enter into enclosed spaces unless they have permission from someone inside–is that not the case for Mister Serpent?

Oh.

But speaking of sealed-off spaces–

Clang! Clang!

Just then.

Nadeko hears sounds coming from inside as she's thinking aloofly to herself–i don't have to check to know that it was the sound of the locks being undone.

i fearfully open the front door–and white snakes come wriggling out. Two of them–Nadeko tries to move her feet out of the way as fast as she can, but the snakes are already gone by then.

Yes.

Just like the hallucinations that appeared in Nadeko's shoe cupboard and inside her desk.

"Sealed-off spaces? They don't mean a thing to me–I'm able to nullify any barrier."

"…"

That's very heartening to know in committing a burglary.

So it seems like those snakes weren't just hallucinations–and now that i mention it, i didn't just see them, i think i felt them too.

i hurry inside to the entrance, close the door, and lock it back up.

i'm being brisk like never before.

But when i think about it more, i shouldn't have locked the door and in fact shouldn't have opened it. Instead, i should have left the house as soon as i possibly could–even putting any ethical questions aside.

An aberration that nullifies any barrier. That lurks in sealed-off spaces.

If only i thought about what that meant.

But not able to find the time now that Mister Serpent is vibrating, no, quaking–what an incredible reaction, he's spinning furiously on Nadeko's right wrist.

I-If this is his dowsing–

The sandbox yesterday can't begin to compare.

"Gah… Yup, this is where," Mister Serpent says, stopping–even Nadeko can tell it's a challenge. If i had to liken it to something, maybe it's like stopping yourself from "chivering" when you're cold. He even seems to be in pain.

"L…Let's hurry, Mister Serpent."

It's impossible not to worry when someone seems to be suffering right in front of Nadeko's eyes.

Taking off her shoes (her slippers), Nadeko puts them in the plastic bag she got on the way and steps up into the hall.

"Wh-Where could it be? Is…Big Brother Koyomi's room suspicious, in the end?"

"Yeah… I'm basically like a compass at a magnetic pole right now, so I'm not completely sure–but I guess it would be his room that I'm finding suspect," Mister Serpent says, but his words seem to lack their usual edge. "Koyomi is halfway to being an expert himself, you see–and he's served by that legendary vampire."

"…"

Served, huh?

Nadeko sees their relationship pretty differently–of course, i don't think Big Brother is serving Miss Shinobu, either.

i don't know, their relationship is like…

It’s like.

“…i’ll hurry.”

i climb the stairs.

i know where i’m going because i was here just yesterday–still, i cautiously tiptoe up to the second floor.

i’m thinking of different excuses i might use in case someone’s home–“i’m sorry, i forgot something when i was here yesterday, so Nadeko let herself in to get it back. The lock on the front door was undone”–as i reach toward the doorknob for Koyomi’s room.

It feels so immoral.

But resigned to the fact that her life is already over, Nadeko has sunk into desperation–i feel strongly, strongly, that whatever happens can happen, Nadeko can forget it.

And in fact, after this, *whatever* does *happen*–and Nadeko does *forget it,* but totally not seeing it coming, she just enters Big Brother’s room.

Maybe Tsukihi is actually taking care of herself in the next room over after getting beaten up by Koyomi–no, chances are she was hospitalized after what she went through, i realize belatedly as i step in. If she hasn’t come out to challenge Nadeko yet, it’s probably fine.

…i do pray she’s in class and not the hospital… She might have done something awful to Nadeko, but we’re still friends.

“Still friends… Yeah… If only i could have felt that way.”

“Hmm?”

“i’m talking about back then…about the girl who put the charm on Nadeko… i stopped seeing her as a friend afterwards…but there must have been a better way–”

The verbal abuse i heaped on everyone in class.

It was what Nadeko wanted to tell herself–i bet.

"…Still, it was impossible," i continue. "Because we're not saints. That girl isn't a saint, and neither is Nadeko. If someone does something to you that you hate, you're going to hate them. If they're nice to you, you're going to like them."

"You're being so honest. What's the matter, Nadeko?"

"Nothing's the matter…"

Nadeko closes the door to Koyomi's room and decides to take a look under his bed first–though it can't be hidden there.

If the Hawaiian-shirted expert–in other words, Mister Oshino–really entrusted *it* to him, Big Brother would hide it somewhere and not display it.

"Now that i think about it, it's really true…" i muse. "Nadeko likes people who are kind to her, and she hates people who are mean to her…"

"…"

"Liking someone who thinks nothing of Nadeko, let alone someone who dislikes her… It's just not possible. When you're dealing with people, the way someone feels about you is very important."

"And if the way you feel about them is just as important to them–I wouldn't want to be friends with anyone with feelings like yours, dear."

"…"

"Speaking of which, Nadeko, you don't remember anything about the boy who told you he liked you, do you? Not his name, not his face, nothing. You didn't know who he was until then, sure, but not remembering the name of someone who said he liked you? Don't

you think that might qualify you as someone with personality issues, hmmmm?"

"…"

"And it must be to hide this personality of yours that you never tell people how you really feel, always looking down at the ground and falling silent–*hsshh, hsshh!*"

"…Right."

Oh ho, the Serpent reacts oddly.

Is he surprised that Nadeko nodded like an honest girl? Maybe.

Because Nadeko isn't an honest girl.

i didn't like telling people how i really feel.

i didn't like doing things.

And that's probably–because i'm not kind.

i'm not easy to deal with–at all.

"You're right. Probably," i say to Mister Serpent as i search through Koyomi's room–well, it seems like i'm conversing, but maybe it's more like Nadeko talking to herself.

At least, i wasn't expecting a reaction.

"What Tsukihi said was correct."

"Hmmmm?"

"Nadeko likes Big Brother because, that way, she never has to get hurt… Well, i mean, romance takes up so much energy–not to sound like you, Mister Serpent. Falling in love with someone, being loved back… An unrequited love where you just 'yurn' might actually be easier… You don't have to be distracted, and you don't have to feel lost, just like Tsukihi said."

"…"

“That’s the only explanation that makes sense, right? i tried to make all those excuses this morning…but a girl as unserious as Nadeko spending six whole years really loving a friend’s big brother who she barely knows, and him alone… It’s a stretch, isn’t it.”

It’s not like there was something in particular.

There were various things, but there wasn’t anything, either–no big story behind it all.

Although Tsukihi was convinced by her own words, it’s not like there was a key episode back when i was in second grade–Big Brother saving Nadeko when she was about to get hit by a car, or stepping in to help when Nadeko was being bullied–we just played games together in Tsukihi’s room.

If i have to give a reason.

It’s all because he was Tsukihi’s big brother–all because he was Koyomi Araragi.

In other words, the only explanation is that it felt safe to like him because he was so beyond Nadeko’s reach.

“i think being in love with someone is a very wonderful thing–a feeling like that’s all you need in life, all you need to be cheerful and to make everything soft and fluffy.”

“…”

“The world is such a tough place, with so many things that are annoying or that don’t go your way, and what you think will always be there for you might crumble at a moment’s notice, and the rules you think you could rely on turn out to be less reliable than you thought, and your body and mind get so easily tired, so exhausted that you might just find yourself wanting to slump over on the ground, but even so, it’s like you can keep pushing yourself if you love someone.”

"…"

"It's like you can smile even when you want to cry–which is why…" Nadeko pauses like she's advising someone. "Which is why Nadeko fell in love with Big Brother, maybe–just to feel more stable by being in love."

"To feel–more stable."

"i mean, isn't it gross if you think about it? That's all it is, right? Gross. i bet Tsukihi, too, wanted to say that. Staying in love with someone when you haven't met him in six years… It might be beautiful and romantic if it was some tale…but to be frank, you're just a stalker. That's just heavy," Nadeko rambles. "i've been thinking…about what Tsukihi meant. It was tiresome, but it's not like there was anything else to do–so i thought about it."

"…"

"Ideals that are too lofty can ruin people–well, i guess she said they were actually Miss Hanekawa's words… Anyway, isn't that like chasing after a dream without any worries since it'll never come true?"

A dream that can never come true.

An ideal that you can never reach.

A lost object you can never find.

Then, even if it doesn't come true, even if you don't find it, even if you don't reach it–*you never have to get hurt.*

You won't have to change. You won't have to do a thing.

"i mean, it'd be such a shock if a reasonable dream never came true… Lofty ideals are probably a way of protecting yourself. Because when they don't happen, you can always say, 'i knew it.'"

Don't dream. Look at reality instead.

How many setbacks has Tsukihi had to experience? Just how much did she need to learn before she could talk to Nadeko the way she did, like she knew it all?

Experiences that would make Nadeko fold if she had them even once–knowledge that would cause her life to end.

Yes.

Snapping on her teacher and turning the rest of her class against her the way i did–must be nothing to Tsukihi.

Tsukihi wouldn't even leave school early afterwards–she'd probably sit through class like nothing happened.

It's that Tsukihi that Nadeko–

"You know, it just might have been Tsukihi that i fell in love with first. Maybe, by falling in love with Big Brother, i wanted to become Tsukihi's sister…"

"…"

"Sometimes i notice that i'm working to find Koyomi's good points."

"…"

"Mm…"

Nadeko's hands are moving the entire time she's talking, but i still don't find anything resembling Mister Serpent's object of worship.

Maybe it's not in this room?

On the other hand, Koyomi's room is the absolute furthest I'd be allowed to go in searching this home… Hrmm.

In any case, when i look at it like this, his room lacks individuality.

i guess you could say that i don’t feel anything Koyomi-ish from it? It’s not really showing Nadeko anything about the person who’s always using it.

There are barely any items that could tell you about his hobbies or tastes. All the books on the shelves are famous, and i don’t get a glimpse at anything like his more fanatical interests.

It’s almost like a hotel room.

With the bare minimum in it…like he’s ready to leave at any moment–and has already gotten ready to do so.

…

If a family member’s room looked this way, you might feel uneasy–i have that thought.

“Wait.”

And then.

Right when i’m quietly having that thought, i discover an item that makes his hobbies and tastes very obvious.

A dirty magazine.

A number of them, in fact, together inside his bottom desk drawer.

“Yikes. Yikes. Yikes.”

“Hey, Nadeko?”

“Th-This really would make your family feel uneasy…”

i take the top one from the stack.

The cover is unbelievable.

To describe it to you, it’s… How do i put this…there’s a girl with pigtails and…no!

Nadeko can’t say more.

“W-Wow. This is so tailored… i should have expected as much from Big Brother Koyomi… No joke… W-Well, it’s fine, in its own way…”

“Hey, Nadeko.”

“Be quiet. Your object of worship might be in between the pages of this magazine.”

“Nah… It’s definitely not that flimsy…”

“Hrmm.”

i take a careful look through it.

i examine each page so as not to miss anything.

It would be a big deal if i missed Mister Serpent’s object of worship, you see.

“Nadeko…” i mutter.

“Hm?”

“Nadeko–doesn’t like to say ‘I’ or ‘me’… Why do you think that is?”

“How should I know? Figure it out for yourself.”

“That’s it.”

“Hunh?”

“That must be it–it’s because Nadeko doesn’t have a ‘self,’” Nadeko states, reaching for a second magazine after finishing the first.

This second one, completely different, is about foreign affairs.

H…How scandalous.

i can’t do this. i can’t even start to do this.

“Nadeko…doesn’t have a self,” i mutter.

That’s something else i’ve been thinking, as much as i didn’t want to think it.

“A self? Are you sure you don’t mean self-confidence, my dear?”

“No. A self.”

“What are you saying, Nadeko? The person right there is you, and no one else.”

Those hands. Those legs. That body.

Down to every one of the hairs on your head–all of that’s you, Mister Serpent details.

“So of course you have a self.”

“Yeah…of course there’s *someone* named Nadeko Sengoku. A *someone* they call Sengoku. Someone they call Nadeko. That *someone* you call ‘dear,’ Mister Serpent–she’s right here. There’s definitely a girl in her second year of middle school who’s searching through Big Brother’s room right now.”

But that’s not *me.*

i can’t see that as being who *I* am.

“Nadeko is someone else as far as *I* go–which is why Nadeko never calls herself *me.*”

“…”

“*I*’m not the person everyone takes to be Nadeko Sengoku–if they think Nadeko Sengoku is cute, they’re not talking about *me.*”

Somehow it feels like i’m living another person’s life.

Like i have no self.

Nadeko lives her life doing what others say.

She only reacts to what others say.

She never does anything herself–of course she doesn't.

Because Nadeko has no self.

She's not even empty–there's someone on the outside of Nadeko who's a question mark, and on the inside too–

"Talk about stupid. So in other words, you're a kid," the Serpent pooh-poohs.

"…"

"That really is why little brats call themselves by their first name. Everyone else calls them that, so that's how they 'understand' themselves–basically, it means they haven't formed an ego. Oh, and that's why your teacher refers to himself in the third person, too. Because calling himself 'your teacher' gives him a sense of actually being your teacher."

"In other words, Nadeko not having an ego…not having something she can call herself…"

"There's nothing wrong with that–not on its own. Living a life that's true to who you are isn't all that valuable, actually."

"But…if i don't have an ego, if i don't have a self…then there's no point in being here."

"That point is too much for you to bear, Nadeko, right?"

"…"

He's right.

It's not like Nadeko wants an "I" at all.

If there's anything she wants, it'd be–

"Magazine number three…"

Uh oh.

Is it okay for a high schooler to be in possession of this? Your entire life could be ruined if it got out that you owned such a thing.

“Maybe we should say this is your object of worship and take it home with us…”

“Is that how you view my object of worship?”

“Ah.”

Flutter.

Something floats down from inside the third magazine–a bookmark?

Koyomi is more meticulous than i thought if he’s using a bookmark in a centerfold collection… If he used a bookmark, does that mean that he likes this page in particular?

In that case, i need to check it out.

Let’s see, here.

“Really, Mister Serpent, like you said once–Nadeko doesn’t feel that bad about it.”

“Hm?”

“About your breathren? Your brothers? Your underlings…thralls? In other words, about killing all of those snakes…and in such a cruel way.”

i don’t regret it. i don’t feel any remorse.

i don’t–do a thing.

“Nadeko just thinks she couldn’t help it…because Nadeko thought she’d die otherwise. There’s a possibility that Nadeko just might feel remorse, but *I* don’t.”

“…But your massacre was meaningless, and in fact, only made things worse for you, didn’t it?”

“Still, i couldn’t help it…because Nadeko didn’t know.”

“…”

“i couldn’t help it. Yeah. Nadeko can deal with anything that way. Because everything that happens to her is someone else’s problem.”

Even the way i’m trespassing on Big Brother Koyomi’s home now–i feel like there’s nothing i could do about it. If he gets mad at Nadeko–she’ll probably apologize.

After all, someone is mad.

Of course i’ll apologize.

Like it’s someone else’s problem.

“And it’s because you’re mad, Mister Serpent–that Nadeko is atoning like this.”

“No, I’m not particularly mad at you–”

“i bet Nadeko could kill a person and still say, ‘i couldn’t help it’–”

“Nadeko!” Mister Serpent suddenly shouts–surprising her and freezing her hand before it can flip another page.

“Wh-What… Is it something about the girl on this page?”

“No, no… The bookmark that was inserted there.”

“The bookmark?”

The one that fell on the floor?

Could it be a special first-run bonus with a girl’s photo on the opposite side? Nadeko does as she’s told and picks up the facedown bookmark.

And then–

“Ah…”

Drawn on the front side–is the picture of a snake.

One that's eating its own tail.

A picture–of an Ouroboros.

"And wait…is this not a bookmark…but a talisman?"

i think back.

Yes, the talisman that Koyomi stuck on Kita-Shirahebi Shrine's hall in June–the talisman that Mister Oshino supposedly entrusted to him.

That's what it looks like. It's almost "identacle."

Wasn't the work of putting that talisman on the shrine worth more than five million yen? Of course, there were characters written on that talisman, while there's an illustration on this one. To say that they're similar might not make logical sense.

But.

The red ink used–to draw the image, and to draw those characters, is similar–the strokes of the brush are undeniably–

"I see," Mister Serpent says. "So *that's the form* it was preserved in–my object of worship was saved not in material form but as an image… I didn't expect that one. *Hsshh, hsshh.*"

"An image…"

It wasn't a corpse.

It wasn't a pile of bones, or even a mummy…

That makes sense, it'd be easy to take away, to save, to hide like this–and it helps explain why Mister Serpent couldn't find it despite his powerful dowsing skill. But…

An image?

"S-So people can worship this? i mean, it's–paper-thin."

"They sure can."

Even if it's–paper-thin, Mister Serpent answers Nadeko without so much as a pause.

He's shamelessly contradicting what he said before.

"You humans don't think twice about worshipping images."

"W-Well, true, we do fall in love and start admiring them, but that whole culture is pretty recent…"

"No, no. That's not what I mean."

"A-Are you saying like paintings and not just photographs?"

"i'm talking about Rembrandt and Da Vinci, that sort of stuff."

"Ahh…"

Okay.

Now that he mentions it, that's worship–isn't it?

"It doesn't have to be an image," the Serpent says. "It could be music, or literature–anything could end up being worshipped. And of course that includes corpses, rocks, trees, and the like."

"…"

Nadeko takes another look at the talisman again when he says this–hm.

It just looks like a plain image to Nadeko.

Not the kind that gets worshipped, i think.

It would still look like a bookmark if it never got referred to as a talisman…but maybe that's exactly why this was the perfect hiding place.

Normally, you wouldn't expect a shrine's object of worship to be hidden in the pages of a dirty magazine–in fact, isn't that a good way to get yourself cursed?

It might actually be why Big Brother's luck has been so bad recently, and his life full of so many disasters…

"Turning an existence, a concept, into an image to preserve it forever–I guess there's wisdom in it. But to think that I, Master Serpent, could ever have a body so paper-thin–*hsshh, hsshh.* You're right, Nadeko, knowing oneself is harder than you'd expect."

"…So does that mean everything's okay?" Nadeko asks, looking at one side of the talisman, then the other–to check with Mister Serpent.

A final check.

"Now, Mister Serpent, you have your energy back… Which means you can keep on existing without having to worry about running out–"

"Well, I doubt it'll last forever–this piece of paper is only like a copy of the original, and it's not like I'll be able to regain all the faith in me that's been lost. But I should be able to continue on for a few centuries–a lot longer than if I was an e-book. Come on, Nadeko. Hurry up and *let me eat* that talisman."

"Let me eat…"

"Don't worry, I'll keep my promise–I'll make sure to resurrect your bangs. No, maybe I owe you more as thanks. If you have any other wish, I'll grant it for you."

Mister Serpent is in a better mood than he's ever been–you could even say he's high.

i don't blame him.

He finally found the thing he wanted, his body–his energy, the source of it.

"…"

“Hm? Nothing, Nadeko, no wish? I don’t mind how ambitious. Like reversing what happened at school today–I should have enough energy left over to pull it off.”

“Ambitious…”

Something–out of reach.

A wish.

Like i’m visiting a shrine–in that case, what does Nadeko want?

What do *I* want.

For the girl called Nadeko Sengoku.

“i don’t need you to make it so that today never happened.”

“Hmm? Are you sure, Nadeko? After all that talk about your life being over? Well, I’d only be erasing everyone’s memories, but still–are you really fine with everything being over, hmmmm?”

“It doesn’t matter either way… You see, Nadeko is bad at working in groups.”

“Huh. Sure, I’d assume as much.”

“But sometimes i think about how arrogant it is to say that you don’t work well in groups, too–what you’re saying is that you don’t belong with the people around you. Nadeko is scared of the words ‘pair up with whoever you like’–because there’s no one she likes.”

“…”

“That’s why it doesn’t matter either way–for Nadeko, it’s been over for Nadeko from the start. It’s been over for her for a long time now. It’s just that *I* never saw that. It was already over, done for, and not about today, whether or not that charm was cast, but no matter what.”

It was already over.

“…So, what, nothing?” presses Mister Serpent. His good mood and all the excitement has vanished–he sounds serious. “Nothing you want to ask a god for?”

“Ask for.”

“Pray for, if you prefer.”

i think.

The question makes Nadeko think.

It’s tiresome, but–i think.

“My dear…”

Nadeko speaks.

Speaks the tiresome words.

“My dear Big Brother Koyomi… If Nadeko asked for him to love her back…could you make even that come true?”

“That’s asking for too much, Sengoku.”

The voice comes from behind Nadeko–isn’t Mister Serpent’s.

i don’t have to turn around to be able to tell.

He’s here now–right behind Nadeko.

Big Brother Koyomi.

Koyomi Araragi is here.

021

Let Nadeko tell you just how cruel, how impossible, and how grave the current situation, which must be more or less the narrative's climax–is for your reference.

i doubt words can convey it, but Nadeko needs to try as hard as she can.

It's important to try.

i don't like having to work hard, but this is probably the last time in Nadeko's life that she's going to have to try–uhm.

First off, Nadeko is in Big Brother Koyomi's home right now, in his room. i'm trespassing, by the way. Nadeko opened the locked front door without asking and even placed her shoes in a plastic bag she brought with her in order to cover up what she's dared to do, which is breaking and entering.

On top of all of that, i'm rummaging through Koyomi's room.

Something i wouldn't be allowed to do even if i were family.

i have a debt of gratitude to him so big i can't repay it–he, and i say this without exaggeration, saved Nadeko's life, but this is how i'm repaying his kindness.

Not only am i breaking and entering, i'm violating his privacy.

If that were all–though i shouldn't even be using that phrase–it would be one thing. To make matters worse, Nadeko has gone and found the dirty magazines Big Brother stores in his desk drawer, read the top two from cover to cover and tossed them to the floor, and has a third one open on her lap.

And then, after all of this.

After she's been witnessed doing this–she says it.

Dear Big Brother…

Nadeko wants him to love her back.

i've gone and said it–

"……nkk!"

Between turning pale and blushing like her cheeks are on fire, Nadeko's face must look like a marble.

i can't move. i can't stand.

i can't even turn around–or blink.

A dream. This is a dream.

Nadeko is dreaming–tut tut.

Tut tut, Nadeko.

Remember what Tsukihi told you?

i should be looking at reality instead–

"Listen, Sengoku. Nadeko Sengoku."

Big Brother Koyomi's voice continues from behind like he's completely uninterested in Nadeko's attempt to escape reality–he's stifling any emotions, and i can't guess what his expression is like.

He won't let Nadeko run from reality.

i can't retreat into a dream.

"I'm not going to do anything to you…so just calm down. Okay?"

"…"

Calm down? What an unreasonable demand.

Big Brother is asking the impossible of Nadeko.

Calm down?

So in other words, die?

“I want you to slowly–put it on the floor.”

i don’t know what he’s talking about.

None of his normally comforting words are making it to Nadeko’s brain.

Why is Big Brother here?

What about school? Saving people?

What’s going on–well, i don’t know if he’s been saving people.

But in that case, what’s he up to?

“Can you hear me, Nadeko? Put that–on the floor. That’s all you need to do, it’s fine. Just do that, and it’ll solve everything.”

“…”

That?

Could he be talking about the pinup magazine on Nadeko’s lap? Yes, he’s right, i should let go of it asap. It’s bad for Nadeko’s education.

But please listen, Big Brother Koyomi, you have it wrong. Nadeko wasn’t tearing up your room to look for these.

That isn’t why she’s committing a crime.

But i’m in no situation to be mouthing excuses–however you look at it, right now Nadeko is a precocious, curious early bloomer.

“Muh, muh, muh, muh, muh, muh, muh…”

Nadeko’s quivering voice, her quivering tongue, her quivering lips.

She’s never had more trouble in her life rolling out words, even as her vision is spinning.

Still, summoning every bit of strength, i call out to him–to Mister Serpent, on Nadeko's right wrist–to ask for his help.

"I-It's okay now, Mister Serpent… I-It's okay if he finds out about everything…"

It's okay if he knows.

That Nadeko isn't a victim, and everything else. It's okay if Big Brother finds out–so please, just explain it all to him.

It's fine now. All of it–it's fine.

"Muh-Mister Serpent–"

But the Serpent doesn't react.

He doesn't even budge there on Nadeko's right wrist–as if he's turned into nothing more than a plain accessory, the moment Koyomi shows up.

"Wh-Why–"

Why won't you say anything?

There's no point anymore in our promise for Mister Serpent not to speak or move when other people are around–

"M-Mister Serpent…"

"Sengoku. Can you hear me?"

Koyomi's low voice continues as if he isn't even registering Nadeko's plea to the Serpent–

"Listen to me. Put it down," Big Brother says. "*That talisman–put it on the floor.*"

So says.

Big Brother Koyomi.

"……"

……

The talisman?

That talisman?

It was inserted into this pinup magazine–a bookmark.

An image of the Ouroboros.

He's talking about…Mister Serpent's object of worship?

"B–"

Hm?

Is there something–wrong here? Am i mistaken?

Hold on a sec–in other words…Big Brother knows why Nadeko is searching through his room?

Even without an explanation from Mister Serpent–why is that?

i mean, Big Brother Koyomi shouldn't know anything–

"B…"

Nadeko–with the magazine still on her lap–just barely gets her neck to turn.

"Big Brother… Wh-Why?"

Then she asks him.

"Why–do you always…know everything?"

"I don't know everything, I just know what I know."

Now that i'm looking, it's not just Big Brother Koyomi in his school uniform–next to him is a little blond girl in a dress, Miss Shinobu Oshino.

She's by Big Brother's side–

Like she belongs there.

With a gruesome smile on her face–she's gazing at Nadeko.

Her fangs bared and her chin held high, as if she's looking down on Nadeko–scorning her.

This girl who's supposed to be nocturnal is gazing at Nadeko in the middle of the day.

"…"

"Sengoku–"

In contrast, Koyomi looks serious as he stares right at Nadeko.

It's the definition of a piercing gaze.

While it does look like he might be angry, even more than that–he seems worried.

Worried?

No–Nadeko is worrying him.

She's making dear Big Brother–worry.

"That–" he points at the talisman.

The "that" in Nadeko's left hand–he calls it "that."

"That's a lot more dangerous than you think it is–but it's not too late. Yes, you made a small mistake–it's okay. Everyone makes mistakes–and this time, it just happened to be you."

"…"

A mistake? Not too late?

This, the talisman Nadeko is holding, isn't what she thinks it is–what does that mean?

If it's not what Nadeko thinks it is…then what is it that she doesn't?

Really, just how much–does Koyomi know?

And what doesn't he know?

"i-i'm not…mistaken," Nadeko asserts. Despite the situation, she says it straight to Koyomi's face–i'm timid, yes, but something very precious in Nadeko might fall apart otherwise.

How ridiculous.

Something very precious in Nadeko–already fell apart, a long time ago.

"N…Nadeko is doing…what she ought to do… It's tiresome, but she has to… She doesn't really want to…but she needs to…"

She's only forceful at the beginning–and even the beginning must not have sounded good to anyone else–before it gets more and more confused.

Incoherent.

Nadeko can't stand Big Brother's gaze…and turns her head back around to look straight in front of her again.

If only i had bangs, i could just cast down my eyes.

Now–with her back to Koyomi.

It's as if she's defying him.

It's as if she's opposing him.

"i…i had to, i had to, i had to."

"Yeah. I know. It's okay, Sengoku–"

Big Brother Koyomi's voice is nothing if not kind.

It isn't the least bit combative and seems to envelope Nadeko–i just want to leave everything to him.

"–But that's something very dangerous. That item couldn't be any more dangerous. That item is cursed. I was fine with keeping it, being entrusted with it, but I didn't know what to do with it and shut

it in there. I wanted to forget about it, that's how bad it is–Shinobu can't even eat it. It's not something you could deal with. So–"

"…"

It's–probably true.

After all, it's a holy object of worship.

Something that was enshrined as a god–normally it wouldn't ever find its way into the hands of a middle schooler like Nadeko.

But–

"S-Still, Big Brother. Na…Nadeko does have to 'deal' with it…because that's how Nadeko is going to atone."

"Atone?"

Koyomi reacts to the word.

He seems suspicious, in fact.

Almost like he heard a word at odds with the situation–a reaction you'd have to seeing a sewing machine on top of an operating table.

"Y…Yeah. Atone," Nadeko still says.

As if doing everything i can to explain might improve the situation in some little way–like Nadeko mistakenly believes that she can do something about a situation that's already finished.

"i…i'm not a victim… Nadeko isn't a victim… She's a victim, but she's also guilty…"

So.

i need to atone–wait.

Is something wrong here?

"I see. You've been carrying all kinds of burdens. I'm sorry I never noticed."

I heard about what happened at school too, he adds–hold on, at school?

Does he mean when Nadeko became Naughtyko?

Why would Koyomi have heard–no, maybe it's not that mysterious. Nadeko's middle school is full of students who are friends with Tsukihi and Karen, so they hear about it whenever any kind of incident happens, and *that* was easily big enough to call an incident.

If word of it got to the Fire Sisters, then Koyomi would find out about it–especially after what happened this morning.

Is that why he came back home?

Because he found out that Nadeko left school early? No–that might have been part of it, but it can't be everything. He wouldn't have been able to guess that Nadeko was coming here.

So there has to be something.

Something Nadeko doesn't know but Big Brother does.

…But so what?

How does that matter?

It doesn't mean anything anymore.

Whatever Big Brother knows, whatever Nadeko doesn't–now, it doesn't mean a thing.

Because–he already knows.

The one feeling Nadeko didn't want him to.

So nothing else matters to her anymore–it's all over.

If everything is going to come to an end–then let it.

"I never noticed, I'm sorry," Big Brother says–but i don't really know what he's talking about.

He never noticed for Nadeko–he says.

But Nadeko didn't want him to notice.

She wanted him to leave her alone–she didn't want it noticed. Big Brother Koyomi was the one person i didn't want knowing what an awful girl Nadeko is.

i wanted to stay a girl who's just cute.

"I promise I'll apologize properly–so for now, Sengoku, I need you to give me that talisman."

"…"

"You–" Big Brother says, with the smallest bit of sadness in his tone. "You always–act annoyed when we talk."

"…!"

Wha?

Hold on a second.

That's not true.

That's not how it is. That isn't why Nadeko lowers her eyes when we talk, Nadeko–

"Are you that way with everyone? Do you find it annoying anytime anyone approaches you? Do you see everyone as an enemy? If you do, I think that's fine, too. If you hate me–then there's nothing I can do about it."

There's nothing he can do, he says.

Please don't.

Did you not hear Nadeko? Didn't i just say it?

Or were you not listening?

To the way that Nadeko feels about Big Brother–

“Even so, Sengoku, that talisman–”

“Have ye had enough of this dragged-out affair?”

Just then, Miss Shinobu, who’s stayed silent the whole time until now, interrupts Koyomi. Her tone is terribly mean, without any trace of sympathy in contrast to Big Brother–she’s being so combative toward Nadeko.

“There’s no need to pay heed to the feelings of this clueless, spoilt child. Smack her and take it from her, that’s all ye need to do. Give her all the reasoning and explanation ye want later. Nay–there’s not even a need to bother with that then. What thou ought to do with this ignorant waif is to sell her off somewhere. Pitiful and cute. ’Twould be mercy to allow her to continue being a victim.”

“Shinobu…” Koyomi reacts to her words, but Shinobu continues bluntly.

“There’s no need for thee to give any consideration to some waif who can think only of herself even in a situation like this. As is thy custom, ye try to save anyone and everyone for any and every reason–but, while I’m at it, ye can’t even answer this waif’s selfish emotions in kind.”

Her words are so cold–that i can’t tell who she’s being cold to.

An ironblooded, hotblooded, yet coldblooded vampire.

i think that was Miss Shinobu’s catchphrase–but coldblooded is all she’s being right now.

Like a snake.

Coldblooded.

“All this brat is, is cute–*all that’s cute to her is her,* and thou ought to abandon such a brat. Enough with thy philanthropy–crimes deserve punishment. She ought to learn this–just as I did.”

“W-Way to talk,” Nadeko can’t stop herself from retorting.

All Nadeko is, is cute?

All that’s cute to her is Nadeko? There’s no way i can stay quiet after being treated to all of that.

i can’t stay quiet.

“Th-That’s not true… Y-You might be right, but… Nadeko’s doing it for herself because she has to, but… She’s atoning, papering it over, but, but–”

Mister Serpent.

He lost his energy and was like a candle in the wind–and to save him.

A tiny little part of Nadeko might really feel that way–

“S…Say something, Mister Serpent,” Nadeko addresses the aberration on her right wrist–the god there. “Don’t be silent…please–help Nadeko. *Cover for* Nadeko.”

You.

Aren’t you a god?

“Enough, forelocked girl,” Miss Shinobu says like she’s fed up.

It’s not a suitable name anymore, but Miss Shinobu probably couldn’t care less.

Trivial differences in humans don’t mean a thing to Miss Shinobu, an aberration. She’s even a specialist at devouring aberrations–

“Rather than rely forever on this Mister Serpent, *some god who hasn’t even been resurrected*–hurry up and give us that talisman. That charmed talisman entrusted by Izuko Gaen to my master–”

Wha?

Hearing this, Nadeko looks at the talisman with the snake drawn on it.

And at her own right wrist.

And enwrapped around it is–no.

Wrapped around it is.

A plain old white scrunchy–it'd do a very good job of holding together your hair.

022

“Shinobu, don’t say anything that might provoke her–Sengoku!”

As i hear Koyomi’s yell, Nadeko takes the talisman in her left hand–*and eats it.*

She swallows it.

She puts the talisman with the snake drawn on it in her mouth.

She puts the whole thing in her mouth like a snake–and swallows it.

“Stop it, Sengoku! It’s not too–”

“’Tis too late!”

i sense Miss Shinobu leaping towards Nadeko after she loudly erases Big Brother’s line–i sense it all right.

Because now Nadeko can see the world using something other than sight.

She feels with heat.

The heat of human bodies.

The warmth of human skin–i can see it.

Because–Nadeko is now a snake herself.

“I must devour her! It’s–too late for this woman!”

“T-Too late? Th-That’s–”

Nadeko turns around–with her whole body this time.

No, to be precise–it happened before i could turn around.

A change.

They were late. They were too late.

“That’s something *I* know better than anyone!!”

Snakes.

Snakes, all of them–the hairs on Nadeko’s head are snakes–what’s more, they’ve *turned* into white snakes.

It isn’t a hallucination.

Physically, in reality–a hundred thousand snakes have nested in Nadeko’s hair. No, nested is a strange way to put it–because those hundred thousand snakes, these hundred thousand snakes, are all Nadeko–they’re all *me.*

Snakes like Nadeko.

And Nadeko is like a snake.

“Hisssssss

Nadeko’s growing hair.

Her bangs grow back in an instant, too–Mister Serpent said he would make Nadeko’s hair grow once he got his power back, and it looks like he wasn’t lying.

It’s just.

Mister Serpent’s existence was a myriad of lies, that’s all.

One of the myriad gods–was a myriad of lies.

“Unh, aah, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

There’s no way for the snakes–for Nadeko to get her hands on her.

To get her hair on her.

i can’t bite her anymore.

“Why…”

It’s at this point–that Nadeko finally finishes turning around.

She’s even on one knee, so the pinup magazine falls and hits the floor.

Meanwhile, the talisman–hits the spot in Nadeko’s stomach.

“Why save Miss Shinobu–Big Brother?”

“Sengoku…”

“*Especially when you didn’t save Nadeko!*”

i pull out a hair.

One of the snakes. Nadeko holds it in her right hand–and at that moment, the white snake thickens and thins–turning into a hard, straight rod.

It’s like a fang.

A large fang. A sharp fang.

A poisonous fang.

“Big Brother Koyomi–Big Brother Koyomi, Big Brother Koyomi–Big Brother Koyomi–Big Brother Koyomi, Big Brother Koyomi, Big Brother Koyomi–”

Nadeko hoists the fang into the air like she’s unsheathing a blade–and screams.

Deliriously.

Resentfully–i scream.

“What about Nadeko.”

The fang makes direct contact with Big Brother’s flank.

The impact’s sensation is awful.

“What about Nadeko–what about Nadeko.”

But that isn’t enough to stop Nadeko, who continues to swing the great fang–Koyomi doesn’t even try to dodge.

Why not?

Is it Miss Shinobu? Is he–giving her cover?

Why. Why would he?

“What about Nadeko? She loves Big Brother too!”

The tip of the fang i’m swinging around–

Sinks into Koyomi’s skin.

Nadeko’s poison, her deadly poison.

It courses through Nadeko’s dear Big Brother’s body.

023

–And now our tale returns to where we started.

Welcome back.

Did you have fun?

i'm glad to hear that.

The grounds of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine–there's no building left here on this rotten and decayed mountain trail, with only a red *torii* gate giving any indication of the nature of the place, and this is where Nadeko stands all alone in a downpour so fierce she can't even see an inch ahead of her.

Alone.

Overwhelmingly alone.

Nadeko is the only one standing.

The other two have fallen–Big Brother Koyomi and Miss Shinobu have been filled with poison from head to toe, turning them a murky black–and as for Koyomi, his shattered heart has yet to regenerate.

But that's an immortal vampire for you.

Every bit as imposing as you hear.

It seems like they're somehow still alive. Neither has met death–though i realize it's laughably funny to talk about someone immortal as still being alive.

And–they're only "alive" if that's how you describe the physiological reactions they seem to be having to the pouring rain, like frog torsos twitching and convulsing after being electrified.

"You shouldn't have come after Nadeko," i mutter as Nadeko swings the fang in her left hand, cutting through the air. "You should have just let her run away, there's no need to bother–not if you

aren’t going to save her. If you weren’t going to, Big Brother, you could have at least rid the world of Nadeko–at least killed her.”

Too weak.

Even i shudder at how cold Nadeko’s words are as she looks down at him with sober eyes–it might have been because of the chilling rain, but that couldn’t be all.

By now.

Nadeko must be completely coldblooded.

Even more than Miss Shinobu–far more.

Nadeko’s body and mind, her blood and heart, must be cold.

Running out of Big Brother’s room after landing a blow and staggering him–

Running all over the place, i ended up here at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, where it all started. Nadeko was hiding under its floor when, sure enough, Big Brother Koyomi came after her.

Even if he had some idea, he couldn’t have found Nadeko blindly.

Was he looking for her the whole time?

Just like that night–yes, probably.

He must have been.

Because Big Brother, the one Nadeko fell in love with, is that kind of person.

That sort of person and–only that sort.

“You said you were here to kill Nadeko…and to go ahead and eat her… But i bet you weren’t really going to kill her or let her be eaten. By the time you blew away the shrine hall, you must have been trying to figure out a way. Because you’re always–all talk.”

Sure, if this were a case of possession, there might be a way of driving it out.

Nadeko continues.

Her words are only getting colder.

“That’s how you always are… It’s how you always behave. You don’t think about winning, let alone your odds, you do whatever comes to mind and hope for the best in a battle…”

It’s just that he’s immortal, and as he is now, Big Brother–Miss Shinobu, too–isn’t exactly strong. He’s not even fully immortal, and especially in a bad match-up, against snake venom, for instance–yes.

You can see the results. It’s a “retched” sight.

“So, anyway,” Nadeko says without taking her eyes off of the two.

Still staring them down–there’s no point in looking at her right wrist anymore.

“What was all this? What was this about? Mister Serpent–why did it end up this way?”

“Like I’ve told you again and again, dear, it’s all your fault–hmmmm?” the Serpent answers in a cynical tone as always, like he’s picking a fight.

No–“as always” is the wrong way to put it.

Mister Serpent–the aberration called “Mister Serpent,” was resurrected when Nadeko ate the talisman only a few hours ago, and is a god.

No aberration by that name existed until then.

He was only in Nadeko’s mind.

“Usually, that’s enough–an aberration, even a god, only exists inside each person, anyway, on the inside, not outside. This image you forced on me is already a creed.”

“A creed… So Nadeko used an image to create an aberration called ‘Mister Serpent’ in her mind?”

“Right, and then you went and revived a long-dead faith all on your own. Well, I ended up being based on a weird character thanks to that… Sheesh, talk about a delusion.”

A delusion. The word sticks in Nadeko’s heart.

“A delusion… So even though Nadeko thought you were her partner, she really was just seeing things, and hearing things?”

“Yep. Seeing what isn’t there to see, hearing what isn’t there to hear. Taking them to be messages and believing you’re the chosen one–what do you call someone who does that, Nadeko?”

Hmmmm? the Serpent taunts.

i have no words.

A pitiful girl.

A painful girl.

Nadeko Sengoku.

“Fantasizing that the divine speaks to you… Whatta make-believe Joan of Arc.”

No wonder i knew what i felt in the shoe cupboard was a snake, a white one at that, when Nadeko couldn’t even see it from her angle.

It was her very own delusion, so how could she not know?

The reason why the white snakes only came out of closed spaces and Mister Serpent wasn’t able to leave the shrine couldn’t be any simpler: the delusions wouldn’t add up otherwise.

Closed spaces–it's in the cracks and shadows we can't see that we're able to imagine an aberration, *where we're able to be surprised.*

Sounds kind of stupid, doesn't it, this talk?

Well, it's not talk, it's a tale–

"Still, it's pretty impressive you actually resurrected me, a god, like that–*hsshh, hsshh.* In short, Nadeko, you fabricated a narrative to make it happen."

"Fabricated–a narrative."

"If you want to know what kind of story this was, there wasn't any story to begin with."

"…"

"You made it up out of whole cloth, concocted a tale that never existed, and played out a grand adventure in your fantasies. The real Nadeko was just living her everyday, unstoried life. You've always been good at escapism, and this has got to be your biggest feat yet."

"But…" Though i'm fully aware that Mister Serpent is telling nothing but the truth, Nadeko keeps struggling against it. "If you were her delusion until now, Mister Serpent…you still knew things Nadeko didn't."

Drawing on her knowledge, seeming to read her mind–the easy-to-understand and far-too-specific analogies too–all of that might be explained away by him being Nadeko's delusion. But Mister Serpent also knew things that she didn't, there was no way she had any expert understanding of aberrations–

"*Hsshh, hsshh.* Are you kidding me? I was your delusion back then, how'd I ever possess any sort of knowledge that you didn't?"

"Th-Then why–"

“You *forgot about it,* that’s all. You acquired a bit of expertise in June reading in that bookstore’s aisles to get rid of the charm placed on you. Of course, like when you cram for a test, you’ve forgotten most of it–but human memories aren’t consigned to total oblivion. No matter how much you think you’ve forgotten–it’s etched into your brain. Just like how you never forget your sins.”

“…i see.”

Nadeko must have seemed ridiculous, like someone watching a taped sporting event again and again and feeling thrilled every time. If Nadeko can reread and enjoy the same book endlessly, how low-maintenance is she?

“But how did you know about Big Brother, about him and Miss Shinobu using spiritual energy at this shrine or something, the stuff that Nadeko wasn’t aware of–”

“You knew that too, dear,” the Serpent declares.

i can’t keep asking him after such a forceful declaration–but seriously, how?

There’s no way–Nadeko could have known.

Who could i have heard it from? Who…

“i’m confused in so many ways…but could you tell Nadeko, Mister Serpent? What happened to make things turn out like this?”

i’m not trying to turn back the clock. Not now.

i’ve gone and done it, and that’s all there is to it.

But i do want to know how i got here–as a matter of responsibility.

As the responsible party, or maybe in the way of atonement.

As the victimizer, at least.

Even i–don't feel like trying to run away from reality anymore.

…

Not like there's any need to now.

"Nothing worth calling a happening happened. Your memories got jumbled up and twisted around by your fantasies, that's all–like a big, winding snake."

"Enough with the metaphors… Since when has Nadeko's understanding been jumbled up? Just answer that. You must know–Mister Serpent."

Wouldn't he?

Now that he isn't Nadeko's delusion but truly resurrected.

But that's also why this entire conversation is silly–because Mister Serpent now equals Nadeko.

Surpassing a delusion, surpassing a possession, one and the same.

The Mister Serpent sealed in that talisman–has been resurrected in Nadeko after she swallowed it.

Mister Serpent is.

Nadeko.

Which is why everything from here is just Nadeko talking to herself–as usual.

"Did the delusions start when i saw a white snake at the shoe cupboard?"

"Yes, but that's not the exact point of origin–in terms of when it started, for you, I'd say around the beginning of the month before last."

"The month before last… The beginning of September?"

The beginning of September means–

“Around when you found out that Big Brother had a girlfriend–when you witnessed him walking happily with her. That’s when it all ‘started’ for you.”

Or maybe that’s when it all ended–revises the Serpent.

The end.

“You sure tried to sound like an adult when you spoke to his little sister–but really, Nadeko, you broke a little.”

“Broke?”

“Well, that probably isn’t the right way to put it. It’s normal, after all. It’s the regular way to feel. Just like your friend did towards you, dear, you simply became jealous–of his little lover.”

“…”

Jealousy. Envy.

Love and all the possessiveness that comes with it–possession.

Oh.

So that’s when Nadeko–was bitten.

By a snake.

By a poisonous snake.

When she was smitten–not by love but by a god.

“And then… And then what did Nadeko do?”

“Why are you asking me that about yourself? You see, you just thought the same thing that your friend did. Like attracts like, don’t you agree, hmmmm?”

“The same thing…”

Having heard this much, there's no need for more questions, no matter how jumbled Nadeko's memories–the bit about fabricating a narrative should have done it, but i still needed to make sure.

From the Serpent's mouth.

That's how i have to hear it–which makes sense.

It makes sense.

Because Nadeko relied on Mister Serpent for that purpose alone–resurrecting him after he lost his faithful, fell into obscurity, and got sealed away to rest in peace.

Fabricating him.

"If i thought the same thing…i tried to use a 'charm' to get rid of that person–Big Brother's girlfriend."

"No, no, stuck in that class of yours, you knew better than anyone how unreliable a 'charm' can be–that's not what you did. But you're right about trying to get rid of her. Wow, you really nailed it."

"…Well, this is about Nadeko."

"You didn't try to take his lover's place, of course. It was just that her existence posed an obstacle to you–for your continued devotion to Koyomi."

"How selfish."

Well, Nadeko is talking about herself.

i go on like it's someone else's business.

"Wallowing in a love that can't be fulfilled because falling in love is tiresome…and after everything it's done for you, feeling jealous because that person finds a girlfriend."

“The feeling might not be jealousy–but what could you do? You couldn’t stay in love with someone who had a girlfriend, but then you weren’t ever going to go after him.”

“Right, what could i do…”

Nothing, probably–

That must have been what Nadeko told herself.

“But…if Nadeko didn’t rely on charms, what did she do?”

“You chose a more reliable method,” Mister Serpent explains. “In other words, you prayed to a god.”

“A god?”

In other words–to Mister Serpent? Is that it?

“After learning that Koyomi had a girlfriend, you visited this shrine whenever you had the time. Do you really not remember at all?”

“…i don’t. So i made the traditional hundred visits?”

“Well, no, not a hundred.”

“You said reliable, but…”

Is it really? i mean…

“Right. Just praying to a god–shouldn’t actually be reliable. That’s what anyone would think. But it was different for you, dear, wasn’t it? Because this is the same shrine where you were freed of the ‘charm’ your friend placed on you in June.”

“…”

Meet an aberration and you’ll be drawn by aberrations.

Is that–what that means?

In other words, *knowing about aberrations you end up believing in aberrations*–

"Oh. So Nadeko learned then–*that turning to the gods works.*"

Which is why–she made the hundred visits.

Well, more like fifteen, i guess.

That was about as often Nadeko could have visited given her daily routine.

"Still, i can't believe i was able to forget that… So did i erase the memories because they were inconvenient?"

"You think you can do something that convenient? You're not a certain someone."

A certain someone? Who could that be.

Mister Serpent and Nadeko don't share the same knowledge anymore, so i don't know who he's referring to.

"You're just pretending to have forgotten, dear. And that's more than enough."

"…"

Pretending to forget… As in lying.

So i lied?

Then Nadeko–was the liar.

Well, why wouldn't she–tell lies?

Since she lies to Big Brother, she would to herself too.

"But even if turning to the gods works…even if it does, there'd be no point in doing it here," i observe.

This shrine, after all–fell into ruin.

A shrine deprived of faith. There were no gods here.

"Right. *Which you, dear–were told by a woman named Ogi Oshino.* That morning."

That morning–the day i was nearly run over by a bicycle.

The morning of Tuesday, October thirty-first.

(Say, Nadeko. I just happen to have seen it many times, and you always seem to be going up to that shrine, and I don't know what you're praying for, but–there's no point.)

(You didn't know? There's no god at that shrine.)

(It functions as a place, sure, but it's finished as an abode for the divine.)

(You can pray all you want, but it's not going to do anything.)

(Well–it might be a different matter if it got back its object of worship.)

(By the way, Koyomi Araragi has its object of worship now–*Miss Izuko Gaen* entrusted it to him, just a few months ago. It must be somewhere in his house. Given who we're talking about, it can't be stored just randomly.)

(A talisman.)

(You could say its god is *sealed* in that paper–by the way, did you know that the *onmyoji* who sealed the god in that talisman a thousand years ago is the same person who made the amulet Araragi-senpai used when he saved you? That's all you need to hear to understand just how valuable and terrifying that talisman is, right?)

(And how mighty the god is.)

(If that god was resurrected–if the seal was undone, I'm sure he'd easily grant any wish of yours–no, really.)

(How to undo the seal? How would I know?)

(It's a snake god, so maybe you just need to get some snake to swallow the talisman whole–)

"–You got that tacky scrunchy from that high school girl that morning, too. As a 'token of your budding friendship'…"

If we were that "deep in conversation"–

Then no wonder time passed so fast.

"…And that got you started on fabricating a narrative."

i did first see the white snake, yes, right after running into Miss Ogi.

"So Nadeko atoning for killing the snakes… Even that was just a pat excuse. A tale i spun so i could search Big Brother's room for the talisman–Mister Serpent's object of worship…"

Nadeko even exploited her crime for the purpose.

A delusion. A fabrication. A bald lie.

Nadeko tried to resurrect a god just to have her selfish wish granted.

And to resurrect that god–i forged a god's voice.

Not only was Nadeko hallucinating–she wasn't looking at reality.

With a tale of her own creation as a decoy–

Nadeko plotted behind its cover to restore a god.

"…But how did i unlock the front door of Koyomi's house from inside? That has to be the doing of an aberration. A hallucination can't explain that."

"You used an actual key, that's all," the Serpent replies dismissively. How sober and unromantic. "Why did you leave home the previous night *in a way* your parents would notice, resulting in Tsukihi and Koyomi being told about it? To enter the Araragi

residence and borrow the key, of course–the plan must have been to return and take your time searching the house when it was empty in the afternoon. Sure, in the end, you could have tried looking for it that night, but there was no guarantee it was in Koyomi's room, and there was no telling when his little sister might come in."

"Tsukihi really did end up coming in."

That being said, despite all of Nadeko's calculations, having not just trespassed but burglarized the home, she got caught red-handed anyway by Big Brother and Miss Shinobu.

i don't see Nadeko becoming a pro burglar.

i don't see anything in her future.

She just stares at the ground, after all.

"Uh-uh, you were able to resurrect me, Nadeko. I do see something in your future."

"You do… What?"

"Being a god."

"…"

"That's no joke–you're a god now. When I was sealed away in that talisman, that object of worship, you resurrected me in you like this, bodily."

"It wasn't like i…"

It's not like Nadeko was trying to become a god herself…

But you could say it's all Nadeko's fault for getting into "a tizzie" and swallowing the talisman when Miss Ogi said to have a snake gulp it down.

Nadeko really is a bad listener.

“Or is this supposed to be some kind of lesson that only you can make your own wishes come true? You shouldn’t rely on any god?”

i try saying that, but it doesn’t feel true at all.

i don’t believe it one bit. Nadeko is still trapped in a delusional tale of her own making.

i’m still–pretending to have forgotten.

“i suppose Nadeko…really played it fast and loose, listening and not listening to people, twisting the truth, tricking herself.”

“Well, the same goes for everyone.”

“But there wasn’t anything i could do.”

There wasn’t, was there? i had to.

“i just–couldn’t help it.”

“…”

“Don’t people find themselves cute, whoever they are? It’s just that Nadeko felt the same way…”

“…Acting like some kind of victim.”

“Kakak,” i hear.

From where Miss Shinobu has fallen–a faint little laugh.

“Victim, culprit, ’tis easy to switch from one t’ the other–positions and situations are all there is. The rights of the victim, the rights of the accused… Truth be told, no such difference–”

“…”

Nadeko silently brings down the fang in her left hand.

It’s quiet again.

i think she’s right, though.

Miss Shinobu is correct–and whether or not she is, the reality is that she's poisoned and flat on the ground.

But now it's clear why Mister Serpent never spoke in front of her–because in this gourmet's presence, the delusion would have been revealed for what it was.

"Um… Okay, was there anything else i didn't understand?" Nadeko searches for doubts like it's routine business, taking care to go down and snuff out every loose end. "Oh, right. Why did Big Brother return to his room just as Nadeko was rummaging through it to begin with? If it wasn't for that…"

If it wasn't–then what. If it wasn't for that?

"He almost sounded like he knew everything. What Nadeko was doing, what Nadeko was trying to do, the narrative Nadeko fabricated, everything."

"Beats me. This, I don't know either. You're talking about something completely beyond the subject of me or you, dear."

"Even if he did know through Tsukihi that i left school early after saying and doing all those messed-up things–"

Now that i think about it, that unwatchable rampage Nadeko went on, too.

The appearance of Naughtyko–was simply Nadeko being naughty and nothing else.

It wasn't the fault of Mister Serpent or any aberration.

It was just the result of a delusion running wild.

"Big Brother couldn't have known that Nadeko went to search his room."

"Who knows, maybe it was a plain old coincidence? Maybe, before heading out to search for you again, he came home to change

or otherwise prepare for a minute and just so happened to bump into you.”

“Mmh…”

It barely does pass as an explanation… The words “just so happened” actually feel kind of convincing.

Just so happened. Right now, it sounds like such a great phrase.

“Wh-What a convenient line of thought, befitting of the waif… As if it explains why I, a nocturnal being, was active in the middle of the day.” It’s Miss Shinobu, who’s being awfully persistent. “Kakakak–she got me, that would-be niece… I can finally hear the scrunchy’s speech, but I suppose this was all part of her plan–”

“……”

Swoosh.

With a swing of the fang, i silence her.

No, i swung it a few more times, just to make sure, just to be on the safe side.

Hm?

Uh, that’s strange. She’s still moving.

Well, i need to stop her.

There. There. There. There. There. There.

She stopped.

She stopped now.

“Whatever. It’s fine.”

“Are you sure?” asks the Serpent.

“It’s fine… Knowing the truth isn’t going to change anything. It just means that Big Brother has his own narrative. One that he didn’t

make up himself, unlike Nadeko's… That's all, it's not enough to make Nadeko want to hear the tale."

"Sounds pretty careless to me."

"And i could care less. i don't know why things turned out like this–but in the end, Nadeko doesn't particularly want to know. She doesn't give a damn, to be honest."

Okay, Nadeko says as she turns.

She goes from leaning more toward Miss Shinobu to leaning in Big Brother's direction.

"So. Guess i'll kill him."

He still seems alive, being a vampire, but i bet he couldn't maintain his form after a few hundred more poison injections.

"Hmmmm? You sure? Seems like you'd be putting the cart before the horse."

"The cart's been there from the start–or maybe it's more like a snake eating its own tail? Or a wild snake chase."

"…"

"Mmh, well, i have to, right? If he's alive, he's going to keep on finding girlfriends and lovers. Nadeko's heart breaking every time would be tiring."

"…"

Forget heroes and idols–let's make him someone that no one can ever reach.

"Of course, i'll get rid of his girlfriend, sure… But in terms of a love that's never fulfilled, isn't it a lot more romantic if Big Brother Koyomi dies? Mostly, though, i don't want to cause him any more trouble."

“…So that’s how crazy you are,” the Serpent says softly. “You’re hopeless. I judged wrong, and you’re wrong in the head. Yeah… You can’t be saved. By anyone.”

“Can’t help it.”

Nadeko raises the fang. Her fully regrown bangs block her vision–but they don’t afflict anything.

Nadeko is the affliction now.

She is the serpent, and the truth.

The monstrous aberrance.

“Because Nadeko’s an aberration–but…” swinging the fang over her head–putting everything into a blow aimed for the heart–Nadeko says.

I say.

“That’s *Nadeko,* not *me*–”

Swoosh–

The moment i start to swing down the fang, an electronic noise fills the shrine grounds. No, it’s pouring right now, so the sound itself doesn’t seem that loud.

The stone-paved path to the hall.

It carries the vibration–Nadeko can feel it.

Like a snake crawling along the ground, i sense the vibration.

“Dowsing…”

No, it has nothing to do with that.

Mister Serpent has no such skill–that was another illusion on Nadeko’s part. There was no malfunction, let alone any function to begin with.

Just a case of phantom vibration syndrome.

A cell phone–but i don't own one.

"…"

Crouching by Big Brother Koyomi's side as he ever-so-slowly recovers and regenerates, Nadeko takes it out of his pocket–the still shaking cell phone.

It must be water-resistant, but making an umbrella with her hand anyway so it doesn't get wet from the rain, Nadeko checks it.

i consider just turning it off, but seeing the caller's name, Nadeko changes her mind.

She changes her mind and becomes mindless.

Pressing the talk button with her index finger and pushing her snake-hair to the side, Nadeko gently puts the phone to her ear.

"Hello, Nadeko Sengoku speaking."

"Hello, Hitagi Senjogahara speaking."

Her voice is so calm, so cool.

It's incredibly flat and lacks any intonation.

Or should i say–any drama.

It's a quiet voice, like she doesn't feel anything, like she isn't the least bit surprised–which shouldn't be possible.

After all, Nadeko answered Big Brother's phone without his permission–you'd find it strange if you called and someone else picked up.

But this person stays completely calm.

"Hello, Sengoku," she says. "Is my man still alive?"

"…Right now, just barely."

Not that i'm overwhelmed by her intense calmness, but i answer her honestly.

Hitagi Senjogahara.

A name i know–it's.

How would i not–it's.

It's.

i mean, it's the name of Big Brother's lover–and the person Nadeko tried to get rid of with a "charm."

A name i may have been thinking of even more than Koyomi Araragi's for these past two months.

How could i not know it. How could i forget it.

"Oh. Good. So I just barely made it in time," she says, not sounding particularly reassured.

But that feels off in its own way–in fact, when i saw her talking to Koyomi–when i stole glances of them–she looked more like a regular girl.

Is this how she is when she's angry?

"You just barely made it in time? What makes you think so?" asks Nadeko–i honestly want to know. "Unless you're somewhere less than a second away, you could hardly say that." i glance at Big Brother Koyomi and Miss Shinobu. "Are you here already?"

"Oh, please," shoos Miss Senjogahara, "I'm at home eating potato chips."

"…Is this a joke to you?"

"I was watching TV and eating chips and was surprised by how closely the phrase 'channel surfing' resembles 'chattel servant,' so I thought I'd call Araragi to let him know."

"…"

It's a joke to her.

Is she trying to defuse the situation?

Or is she just self-possessed as his girlfriend?

i'm pretty sure she shouldn't be, in this situation…

A truly mysterious person.

"But I do think I made it in time," Miss Senjogahara says, quickly putting us back on topic. She's admirably good at it. "I mean, if I were calling after you put an end to my man, I'd have to commit murder."

What got saved here was my future, she quips, her tone not changing one bit.

"Thank you very much, Sengoku. For saving my future."

"…"

"Well, technically, it'd be homicide by assault, battery, intimidation, and unlawful confinement–but anyway, Sengoku, allow me to get straight to the point. Let's make a deal."

"A deal?"

"You can kill me, so could you spare Araragi?" There's so little behind Miss Senjogahara's words, like she's asking you to go buy her a soft drink with her own money. "I offer you this entire future of mine that you just saved. So spare Araragi–and while you're at it, Shinobu, if she's still alive too."

"…What are you even saying?"

"Don't get me wrong, I don't care one way or another about that ex-vampire lolita, but she's Araragi's treasure. If she isn't alive, there's no point in keeping him alive…"

“That’s…not what i meant,” i tell her, wondering what Miss Senjogahara could possibly be thinking.

But i stop right away.

It doesn’t matter.

“No.”

“…”

“i’m going to kill Koyomi, and i’m going to kill you. And i’ll kill Miss Shinobu too. That was my plan from the beginning, so i’m not interested in your deal.”

“Oh. That’s too bad.”

I guess it can’t be helped, Miss Senjogahara accepts readily.

While her reaction is disappointing, she continues, “In that case, from here on, please just listen to the advice of someone who’s older than you. Think very carefully about the order in which you kill us three.”

“Huh?”

“You absolutely mustn’t kill Araragi before Shinobu–it will sever her link to him, and she’ll regain her original powers as a legendary vampire. She’ll gobble you down in no time.”

“…I see.”

True.

Her advice is priceless–without it, i’d have killed Big Brother first because he means more to Nadeko.

“You’re right. Got it–”

“And you know, I think you should probably kill me first.”

Otherwise. I’m going to kill not just you, but everyone, Miss Senjogahara utters the words like they’re any other.

“E-Everyone?”

“Everyone means everyone. What else could I mean?”

“…”

They’re dreadful words.

She’s not even an aberration–just Big Brother’s girlfriend.

“Don’t underestimate my random venting.”

“…Okay. In that case, i’ll start by killing you–then Miss Shinobu, and Big Brother last. Will that do?”

Thank you, Nadeko says.

Nadeko can thank someone who’s generous to her.

People who are kind to Nadeko are good people.

“I don’t need your thanks. Instead, Sengoku, would you listen to a request of mine?”

“Huh?”

Wha? Why’s she starting to sound like a pushy salesman?

“Oh, it’s nothing much–you’re a god now, who’s to be worshipped, the master of that shrine, so why not heed the request of a little old commoner? I’ll even make you an offering, how about that?”

“…i’ll listen, at least.”

i’m interested.

What is Miss Senjogahara going to say here?

What might the kind of person who becomes Big Brother’s lover request of Nadeko–of a god?

“You can kill us in that order, Sengoku. But could you give us some time?”

“Time?”

“Now that you’re an aberration, won’t you be existing forever so long as people worship you? In that case, what’s wrong with waiting a bit? Like a day, two days, a week, a month, or…half a year.”

Those last words, *half a year.*

For the first time–i sense a strong nuance in her speech.

“If your murderous intent is the real deal, then you shouldn’t mind. If it’s not just an impulse but the real deal–if it’s not some temporary emotion but how you truly feel, then you should be able to wait.”

“Half a year… What’s in half a year?” i ask in return.

“Graduation.” Miss Senjogahara doesn’t even try to keep it secret. “We’ve been working very hard for a while now so the two of us can graduate together… I’d feel bad for Hanekawa, too, if all that effort went to waste.”

“…Graduation.”

i can’t believe it. i can’t believe the word–such an everyday word, would come up here at this moment.

A word we take for granted.

Graduation…

Nadeko can’t go to school anymore. She’s no longer human, all her hair is snakes, and she’s been trying to kill her object of affection, yet–graduation?

“Kh…”

Nadeko.

No, *I* react to Miss Senjogahara–

“Kh…ah hah, hahah. Ahaha… Heh.”

Like so.

i burst out laughing–how can i not?

i guess i'm quick to laugh even as an aberration–oh what a needless character trait.

Really. i don't need it.

"All right… Then i'll wait for half a year."

"Ah. Thank you very much," Miss Senjogahara expresses her gratitude once again.

But i still sense no emotion in her words.

While it almost feels like i'm talking to voice synthesis software–this must be none other than her natural voice.

The natural voice she uses with Nadeko.

"Half a year…" i confirm, "until graduation day, to be precise. As soon as the ceremony is over, walk yourselves to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. i'll be waiting for you there."

"What? We can't celebrate first?"

"Nope."

What is she even thinking?

Well–the same goes for Nadeko.

"At any rate, the six months are just a 'stay of execuetion'… You better not do anything like hold hands with Big Brother during those six months."

"My goodness," i hear from the other end. It feels like Miss Senjogahara has a smirk on her face. "You're trying to poison our relationship or something."

"…"

i’m not laughing at that one.

It’s not even a good joke…

At the same time, i feel like i don’t hate her–if only Nadeko had talked to her.

If we’d exchanged words–maybe things wouldn’t have turned out this way.

The thought goes through Nadeko’s head.

If i didn’t feel jealous, hostile, hateful–and murderous just because she is Big Brother Koyomi’s girlfriend.

If only i didn’t make a wish–and knew.

If only i knew her.

Maybe things wouldn’t have turned out this way.

Now that i think about it, Nadeko never once tried to get to know anyone.

Ah ha.

That’s why–it turned out this way.

“If, Miss Senjogahara…” Nadeko says. “If we’d met in some other way–you and i might have become friends.”

“Not a chance,” i get shot down with no room for compromise. “Pardon me, but I hate cute brats like you even more than I hate the person I used to be, Miss Nadeko Sengoku.”

The call ends. No farewells.

Folding the cell phone closed in the ceaseless torrent, i agree with her wholeheartedly.

024

Why would there be an epilogue?

There's no punch line waiting, either. What lines are left to cross?

Nadeko Sengoku has become a god. Over.

This is a story that could have ended with just that one line–right, so i have no idea what happened after that to 2-2, Nadeko's middle school class.

If Nadeko's "blowviating" caused some kind of chemical reaction that turned it back into a warm and friendly space, that'd make for a fine tale, but i doubt it, and i can't go back to check, either.

i don't feel like fabricating any more than i already have.

Nadeko's personal prediction is that nothing particularly changed–in fact, maybe things only got worse.

Well, of course, i do hope the situation is starting to improve, that would be for the best.

Let's leave the matter in Mister Sasayabu's capable hands.

Try your hardest. i'm rooting for you from the bottom of Nadeko's heart.

i do wonder about Mom and Dad, too, but that's not something Nadeko can do anything about, either. You do hear all the time about emotional, delicate adolescent girls running away from home and never coming back, so i pray that they take it in stride.

i pray, even though i'm a god.

That said, it'd hardly be cute of Nadeko to chop the story off here and end it like one of those snakes i killed in the past. So instead of an epilogue, why don't i conclude with a preview?

Preview:

One day in March, half a year later–come to think of it, i don't know what day Naoetsu Private High School's graduation ceremony falls on, i'll look that up some time–within the grounds of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, Nadeko sits on the steps of the hall, her back to the offerings box.

She's using the Mister Serpent scrunchy not as a bracelet but as a scrunchy is supposed to be used, to gather her hundred thousand snakes into a ponytail–i mean, half a year will have passed by then, i would hope that i look at least a little different.

By the way, the shrine has been rebuilt, or it's scheduled to be.

This isn't just Nadeko's wish but the town's plan, so the construction should be done by March–they let it sit there when it was in shambles, but as soon as "a shrine was destroyed by heavy rains," there was a movement to rebuild it. i really don't get the world of adults.

Still, it could revive some level of worship. i should be even more powerful by this time in March.

Nadeko has all of her hair bravely bundled up in her ponytail, even her bangs, so you can get a clear view of her face from the front–which means she's also staring straight ahead.

i don't want to hide anything.

There's no reason for Nadeko, with her pit organ, to be staring straight ahead, naturally–but today, this one day, she must.

Because for Nadeko Sengoku, today–is the day she quits humanity for good.

To seeing with her eyes, too–this is her last day.

…Wellllll, at least, that's how determined i want Nadeko to be as she waits–for them.

They're climbing the steps now.

And as they proceed through the gate, that's how i want Nadeko to be.

Koyomi Araragi.

Shinobu Oshino.

Hitagi Senjogahara–Miss Senjogahara is someone i've only ever seen from afar so i can't picture her well even in this preview, but she'll probably show up snuggled up next to Big Brother Koyomi.

She'd be breaking our promise, but i'd like them to at least be holding hands here–or else it wouldn't make for a good picture.

Miss Shinobu Oshino won't look like a little girl then–while she might not take her original form, she might appear to be about the same age as Koyomi.

She'll probably have learned from last time.

No doubt, Koyomi will have raised his degree of vampirism, too–not that it means much in the face of Nadeko's poison.

But i can tell how much more prepared he is.

Probably.

And, though this isn't what we promised either, how wonderful it would be if Miss Kanbaru and Miss Hanekawa were there behind the three.

The full cast.

i couldn't be any happier, as a final boss.

Of course, it doesn't matter if they all come–Nadeko doesn't feel like she'd go down in defeat.

She sways to her feet.

As she does, the countless snakes hiding in the grounds bare their fangs. They are Nadeko's thralls, an extension of her will.

And what would be better than kicking off the final battle with this killer line:

“Welcome, Big Brother Koyomi. Let Nadeko make you look real cute.”

Then, it’s time for the romantic comedy to begin.

The showdown, in more ways than one.

Coming soon. You can count on the gods for that.

Afterword

What to say in a space like the afterword is, more than anything else, up to an author's personality, but putting that aside, when you're reading novels and comics and such, you do get a sense of "the author's assertions" from the narrative itself and not just in his or her explicit remarks. Calling them assertions is a bit of an overstatement, but my point is that there are types of narratives out there where you can begin to see what the author "thinks of as right" when you read them. It's not as if these creators appear directly in the story to talk about what they think is right or wrong or what it is that they like or dislike, but as you're reading, you can begin to read the story in that vein… It's really just a matter of interpretation, of course, and readers are never going to know for sure unless they ask (even if they do ask?) the author point-blank. Still, well, I feel like this phenomenon occurs specifically with novels and comics, or at least more easily with them. Since the creator being an "individual" is clearer, in other words. That makes it so that philosophies don't, or at least are less likely to, get mixed in. When the scale of production gets big, like in movies or dramas, and maybe even in music, which is to say when there are multiple authors, their philosophies get mixed in from their various standpoints, and it tempers each individual's assertions and brings forth a "work" that's independent from any one person's humanity, while it doesn't seem to go that way as much for smaller-scale creations like novels and comics. I want to say there's an advantage in that since you're able to enjoy an "individual," and that's part of what I like about books, but our age is unmistakably moving in a direction that doesn't find value in the individual, and I feel like the true crisis facing the publishing industry might lie there. Personally.

That being said, you probably won't sense any philosophy or assertions to speak of from this book, which is just a novel where

Nadeko Sengoku is as cute as can be. If you really wanted to, you could call it a story that tries to ask what cuteness is. But anyway, this volume marks the start of the sprint toward the end of the *MONOGATARI* series' second season. The next title, *ONIMONOGATARI,* will likely depict the somewhat non-chronological burning of the abandoned cram school, while the final title, *KOIMONOGATARI,* will likely be about our characters graduating. I suspect that I'll end up writing a third season, but I do feel a bit emotional knowing that at last I'll be placing a period on this long tale. You could say I'm in high spirits. All according to plan! And so that was "Chapter Chaos: Nadeko Medusa," *OTORIMONOGATARI,* a novel written hundred-percent well from head to tail.

This is the first time we're seeing Nadeko in color, isn't it?* She looks wonderful. Thank you, VOFAN.

May we meet again in the last two installments.

* Editor's Note: *BAKEMONOGATARI* was originally published in two halves in Japan, and Sengoku did not appear on the cover of either volume.

NISIOISIN

OTORIMONOGATARI

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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